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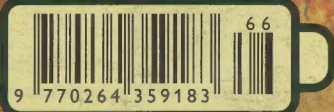
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'ROACH MOTEL'

RICHARD CALDER



CHERITH BALDRY • IAN WATSON • AND OTHERS



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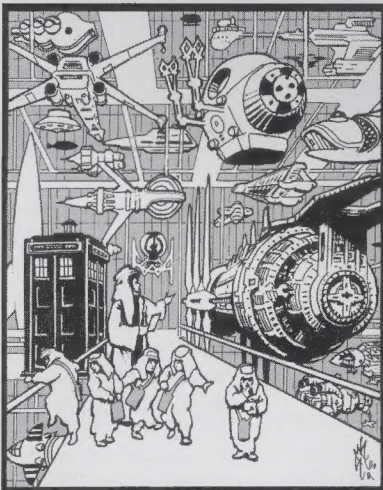
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COMING NEXT MONTH

In hand are new stories by Tony Ballantyne, Stephen Dedman, Paul Di Filippo, Peter T. Garratt, Alexander Glass, Dominic Green, Paul Park, Zoran Zivkovic and many others. A fine selection of those will appear in the May issue of *Interzone* – along with all our usual features and reviews.



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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

APRIL 2001

Number 166

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INTERFACE

Interzone 2000 Popularity Poll

Distracted by last month's special John Christopher issue, we are late in running our annual story poll this year; but if readers can still cast their minds back to the year 2000, we'd be grateful if they could rate last year's stories. Let us know your thoughts on the contents of *Interzone* issues 151 to 162 inclusive (the contents of the latest four issues, numbers 163 to 166, will count towards *next* year's poll).

There's no obligation, but we'd appreciate it if readers (especially, perhaps, those who are writing to renew their subscriptions) could send us answers to the following questions. Just write or type your replies on any piece of paper and send them to us before the deadline of **31st May 2001**. We'll report the results later in the year.

- 1) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 151-162 inclusive (i.e. those with a 2000 cover date) did you particularly like?
- 2) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 151-162 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?

Any further comments about the magazine, including its non-fiction and artwork, would also be most welcome.

David Pringle, Editor

+ INTERACTION +

Dear Editors:

It is that time of year again when I put forward my list of absolute corkers that graced your pages from the Michael Moorcock special issue (#151) to the Christmassy-cum-End-of-Millennium issue (#162).

On my own, personal scoring basis, of the 62 stories published (and, let's face it, they all had merit otherwise they would never have been published at all) 30 were one-tick "fillers," 24 were two-ticks "above average," seven were three-ticks "highly memorable," and one was so sheerly audacious – not to mention as funny as hell – that I awarded it four ticks; and that one was Dominic Green's "Rude Elves and Dread Norse Reindeer" (issue 162).

I have noticed that your magazine has always tended to start the New Year with a flourish, and the Michael Moorcock special issue was no exception. Anyway, on with the best of last year's stories (that which follows is simply my opinion of what were the best and in no way detracts from those not mentioned). In first place, as I say, is Green's "Rude Elves and Dread Norse Reindeer" which was a truly wacky tale that deserves to become a classic of its type. Then, in order of publication, we have:

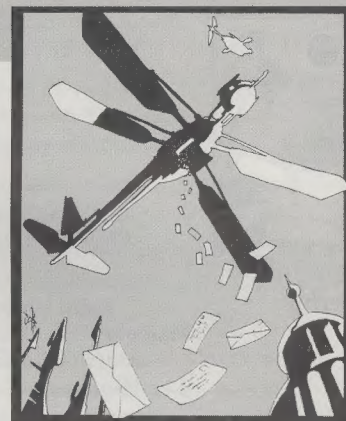
"Ravenbrand" and "Furniture" by Michael Moorcock
 "Balthazar's Demon" by Sarah Singleton
 "Dream of Rain" by Judith Berman
 "All the Roads to Heaven" by Jean-Claude Dunyach
 "Hideaway" by Alastair Reynolds
 "Antibodies" by Charles Stross

Keep up the good work with the foreign translations: it gives us general readers an insight as to how the French, Germans and former-Yugoslavians (not to mention the Japanese) view this field of literature. More, please.

The best cover of the year was issue 157's drawn by Dominic Harman for "Hideaway." I'm a sucker for space scenes. To go against the grain of practically everyone who has written to you, I like Gary Westfahl's forays into your pages, because he never fails to provoke a reaction. I may not necessarily agree with him, but in the main his essays are always well thought out and he's not afraid to express an opinion. I also enjoy "Ansible Link" and "Mutant Popcorn."

Anyway, thank you for another year of entertaining stories, and here's hoping that this year will continue the upward trend.

Brian Zeelie
 South Shields, Tyne & Wear



Brickbats, and...

Dear Editors:

Excellent though many of the stories in it are, *Interzone* 163 continues the worrying trend towards stories that are *about* science-fiction writing rather than being examples of it. George Zebrowski's "Catch the Sleep Ship," for example, is little more than a millennial pep talk, a fireside preach to the long-since converted. And the infection seems to have spread to the usually excellent Paul Di Filippo, whose "Return to Cockaigne" is a well-written but pretty thin satire on heroic fantasy. These stories are merely the latest in a long line of stories whose central preoccupation would seem to be the genre itself and I fear such tales merely reinforce prejudice against genre, even when they are balanced by work as strong as that of Eric Brown and James Lovegrove.

The magazine's non-fiction content, meanwhile, has problems of its own. It isn't Nick Lowe's fault that there hasn't been a movie worthy of his attention for years but reading his literate deconstructions of films designed merely to keep hyperactive middle-American teens chomping popcorn regularly is like having Egon Ronay review a different branch of McDonalds every month.

And while I know that part of the point of Gary Westfahl's column is to be controversial by deliberately being wrong about everything, even he should know that science fiction is not and never was a literally predictive genre. But in "Robert A. Heinlein's 2001: A Space Odyssey" he ignores this obvious truth in order to excuse some swank about having read an obscure Heinlein story even its author had long since disowned. Heinlein, Clarke and the rest were dealing in possible future developments. To speculate on what *may* be is to open up a multiverse of possibilities. To predict what *will* be is to arrogantly claim foreknowledge of history, an act of imagination-denying bigotry even Mr Westfahl should balk at.

Adrian Fry
 AdrianFry@frya1.freemove.co.uk

Dear Editors:

Just a brief message to tell you how much I enjoyed *Interzone* 163. One of the best issues in a long time, I thought. And all the stories had a nice length to them, for a change. Personal favourite: the James Lovegrove. As someone who loves to travel, it struck a chord with me, though I thought the ending a little weak (a case of it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive...?). Kudos to you also for the wonderful George Zebrowski piece, a fine follow-up to the previous month's post-modern tribute to traditional storytelling, and the Tony Ballantyne. The Paul Di Filippo... wasn't to my taste. And I thought the Eric Brown a very minor work. But the good in the issue far, far outweighed the bad. Thanks.

Jamie Barras

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Gesundheit! Chris Gilmore

Dear Editors:

In his review of the latest "Thraxas" novel by Martin Scott (*IZ* 162), Chris Gilmore adds a bit of a German flavour by uttering the exclamation "Gott sie danke!" This is somewhat smarting for me as a German reader, who is used to the form "Gott sei Dank!" for "Thank God!" While cute ("Gotzeedunkee"), somehow "God you thank you" does not quite convey the same meaning.

I am glad John Clute is no longer "buried alive in the Gnostic darkness of the world" and back on board, although he does seem to make a conscious effort to raise his *Interzone* reviews above the simpler form of his online *SFWeekly* pieces. Keep up your excellent work!

Henning Stolte

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Dear Editors:

Unwrapping my February issue (#164) with great delight, I flick to the contents page to peruse this month's offerings. The first shock, no letters page! I hope this offering prompts its return. But the main reason for this letter is Richard Calder, or rather your insistence in printing yet another of his turgid "Lord Soho" stories, his fourth! Note the omission of the word "short." I was under the impression that editorial policy limited stories to between 2,000 and 6,000 words. With this one spanning some 18 pages, I estimate it to be around 18,000 words. It is also a blatant serialization, which I thought was also against your policy. Couldn't these 18 pages have been put to better use premiering three or four new up-and-coming writers struggling for their big break (not that mine are any good I hasten to add). I for one would prefer to have a larger number of varied short stories from new writ-

Erratum

In *IZ* 164, I puffed the next issue, guest-edited by me, with, among others, the announcement of a new Geoff Ryman story. Geoff did send me a story, but having decided it was not up to his standards, forbade me to publish it. While I didn't agree with his reasons, I respect his artistic integrity: foremost, he needs to be happy with what he publishes. He promises us another story as soon as one is available. In the meantime, along with David Mathew (p62), I strongly recommend his new novel, *Lust*. It is vintage Ryman and a *tour-de-force*, and bodes well for the next story he submits to *Interzone*.

Paul Brazier

ers, rather than one or two "big blockbuster" stories from relatively well-known names.

Steven Gross

steven.gross@virgin.net

Editor: Thanks for your comments.

Richard Calder seems to be one of those writers who divides the readership quite sharply into pro and anti. The "Lord Soho" stories are a series (not a "serial"), and some people like them a great deal – others, however, such as yourself, are not so keen. Once the series comes to an end (soon) we shall indeed think carefully about whether we run another series of stories so lengthy. It has never been our policy, by the way, to exclude longer stories; we merely recommend the range 2,000-6,000 words to newcomers who submit material to us, since it's more likely that they'll achieve a first-time acceptance with that sort of length.

Dear Editors:

I won't beat around the bush here – what the hell has happened to my favourite sf magazine while I've been away? Issue 164 was an absolute disgrace! No "Interface," no "Interaction," and a meagre five pages allocated to Britain's most informative book reviews...

I look forward to the John Christopher special.

David Lee Stone

Ramsgate, Kent

davidleestone@talk21.com

Editor: *Hmm! Well, you will have seen the latter by now (issue 165) and we hope that you liked it. As for the relative paucity of non-fiction you refer to, that was just the way things fell out in issue 164. There is plenty of non-fiction in the present issue, and we hope you find it to your taste.*

Letters for publication should be e-mailed to interzone@cix.co.uk – or sent by conventional post to our editorial address (shown on the contents page). Please note that we reserve the right to shorten letters.

Dear Editors:

I co-edit, with Terri Windling, the World Fantasy Award-winning anthology series *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (St Martin's Press). The 14th annual collection will be out in July 2001. We are now reading for the 15th volume, which will include material published in the year 2001.

I am looking for stories from all branches of horror: from the traditional-supernatural to the borderline, including hi-tech science-fiction horror, psychological horror or anything else that might qualify. If in doubt, send it. This is a reprint anthology so I am only reading material published in or about to be published during the year 2001. The submission deadline for stories is December 15th 2001. Anything sent after this deadline will reach me too late. If a magazine you edit will be coming out by December 31st 2001 you can send me galleys or manuscripts so that I can judge the stories in time.

There are summations of "the year in horror," and "the year in fantasy" in the front of each volume. These include magazine and publishing news concerning the horror and fantasy fields, novels we've read and liked, and in my section, "odds and ends" – material that doesn't fit anywhere else but that I feel might interest the horror reader (like strange non-fiction titles, art books, etc). But I have to be aware of this material in order to mention it. The deadline for this section is January 30th, 2002.

When sending me material please put YEAR'S BEST HORROR on the envelope. My address is below. Terri Windling's submissions (marked YEAR'S BEST FANTASY) should be sent to her c/o Richard and Mardelle Kunz, 2509 N. Campbell, PMB 402, Tucson, AZ 85719-3304, USA. Terri covers fantasy and I cover horror. If you consider something both, send to each of us. We do not confer on our choices.

I do not want to receive manuscripts from authors of stories from venues that it's likely I already receive regularly (like *Interzone*, or *The Third Alternative*) or from anthologies, unless I don't have that anthology. And please do not send a SASE to let you know if I like a story. If I choose it you will be informed. If you want to make sure I receive something, enclose a self-addressed-stamped postcard and I will let you know the date it arrived. For stories that appear on the web, please send me (or have the publisher send me) print-outs of your story.

Ellen Datlow

*48 Eighth Avenue, PMB 405
New York, NY 10014, USA*

ROACH MOTEL

Richard Calder



I dismounted from the palanquin. The crowd had grown thick and my litter could make no further progress. I would have to go the rest of the way on foot. I paid my bearers, then, standing on tiptoe, scanned the square. A scaffold had been erected beneath the palace walls. Opposite the scaffold stood the obelisk, where I was to meet my contact. The granite column's obscene brass entablature reflected the light of the newly risen moon. Resignedly, I began to eel my way towards my objective.

I had never conceived that the Square of Heavenly Peace would be almost filled. Timur would have known, of course. Known, too, that the obelisk would prove the only marker amid this undifferentiated expanse of humanity. He had been our agent here for nearly ten years.

By the time I reached the obelisk, Pu-tin-pao, the imperial headsman, had mounted the scaffold. He wore a clean white apron over ceremonial robes. Ignoring the crowd, he began to sharpen the edge of his long, curved blade using a strop that hung from a bamboo stanchion.

"Good evening," said Timur, looking down, his voice pitched an octave or two above the crowd's anticipatory drone. "Come up. You will discover that we have an excellent view." I ascended the half-dozen or so steps that led to the top of the plinth. As I drew level with him he turned away, disinclined, for the moment, to acknowledge me further. He stared towards the scaffold. In his bearing, he seemed as emotionally detached from the night's proceedings as the headsman. I rested an elbow on the iron handrail. A little way off, stalls had been set up. They sold fishballs, lanterns, firecrackers and rockets. Boys played with miniature wooden swords.

I wondered why we occupied such a favourable spot, isolated on a little stony eminence amid the surge and press of bodies. "In my *other* capacity, I occupy a position at court," he said, in answer to my unspoken question, but still not meeting my eyes. "My face is known to this rabble. And it is a face that inspires fear. They will not disturb us." His voice was lowered. Despite his bravado, I think he feared the "rabble" as much as they feared him. The people of Cambulac would likely take as much pleasure in the death of traitors as they did in the death of impecunious young princes. "A Persian has been the latest suitor to fail the test. He –" The voice had become little more than a whisper, his sentence trailing off into incomprehensibility. But implicit in its timbre was something I recognized: a hatred for his mistress as deep as love. Recognized, because, in a less literal, but more poetically apposite sense, Turandot was my mistress, too. I looked at him askance, studying his stony face, a face congested by long years of silent revolt. Hatred. Yes. But no conscience, I decided. I was glad; I did not wish to place myself at the mercy of a man's conscience. I knew too well what undependable things they were.

I moved nearer so that I might hear him. "Look, do you see?" he said, pointing upwards. "The birds of carrion are circling overhead." Several ladies-in-waiting had appeared on the battlements, vulturine in their black, diaphanous plumage and white, mousseline ruffs. Directly beneath them, the scaffold's back-cloth parted

to reveal a door set in the palace walls. A wave undulated through the crowd as imperial guards, priests, mandarins, dignitaries and courtesans all strove to get as near to the scaffold as they could.

The condemned man was being led onto the stage. He was young. Naked. And very beautiful.

"You know what you have to do?" said my contact.

"Of course." I did not care for his clipped tone of voice, nor for the somewhat dismissive way in which he had received me. I was a Captain of the Order of Black Knights. He was a mere operative. The man should have been treating me with greater respect. "Do you know who I am? Do you know of my patrimony? My lineage? My name?"

He turned and met my gaze. "I do not wish to know," he said, curtly, his face registering distaste and astonishment in equal degree. "Who you are is of no consequence here. It is your assumed identity that is of importance. There is to be no mention of the past. No reference to blood, merit or social position except that which the Order has seen fit to bestow upon you for the purposes of this mission." He resumed his former stance, abstracted, untouchable. "I pray you are well briefed."

"I pray you are too, sir," I said. "I know who *I* am. But do you know who *you* are?" I paused, breathing deeply. At such times as I recalled my family's shame and dispossession, a certain bitterness would enter my voice. Since entering the Celestial City two days ago that bitterness had been compounded by a belated, if full, realization that the time of my passion was nigh, and that, soon, all would be over. "You are a man," I continued, "who would, I believe, suffer a death more terrible than that which awaits this Persian, should you fail in your duty and force the Order to expose you." His cheek was afflicted with a barely detectable tic. "And your duty," I added, purging my voice of its acerbity, and allowing the rounded, fulsome notes of true, aristocratic disdain to ring through, "is to get me an audience with the princess. Nothing more is required." I sniffed at the incense-burdened air. "Certainly nothing in the way of criticism or advice. I come from a *proud* line, one that is destined to be restored to all its former glory." I allowed myself a fleeting, self-satisfied grin. My bitterness was, after all, misplaced; I had accepted all that had been done, and willingly, too.

"Nothing more is required. That's true. Nothing more." If he was stung, he kept it well hid – tied up, perhaps, and locked away in the vault in which he had sequestered his passions. He gestured towards the gong that stood in the scaffold's roped-off enclosure. "The first part's easy. The court officials will expect you to present your *bona fides*, of course. But the papers we have prepared for you are excellent. You have them?" I nodded. Timur's eyes narrowed as he focused on the doomed man. "The second part is more difficult. But from what I hear, the Order has found, in you, someone with the requisite psychopathology." His lip curled. "The right motivation, as it were. Someone who can play this sick, sick princess at her own game." He looked suddenly very tired. "Let us hope that her bloody reign is at an end."

The prince knelt. His flesh was bleached by moonlight, each bead of sweat that trickled down his slim, power-

ful torso like a droplet of mercury. He bowed his head, long, dark hair veiling his face and cascading down his smooth chest and abdomen. So refined was his deportment, so delicately sculpted his body, that, despite the well-defined musculature, he might have been mistaken for a young girl if his hair had not stopped short of the glistening apex of his thighs and the organ of generation the virgin princess had so cruelly disdained.

Timur gave a start, gasped, took a step backwards and once more pointed to the battlements. I looked up. The princess had appeared. The sight of her was, perhaps, the one thing that could provoke Timur to betray his feelings. I could understand why. Even at this distance, she was unmistakable. I had studied secretly-taken photographs of her during the long hours of my briefing, but even without that advantage, I would still have known that it was she. She. The one whom I had dreamt of as a child. The one who had possessed me, and made me mad, and demanded of me my career, my honour, even my family. The one I desired more than life. I had glimpsed her semblance before, in the faces and bodies of women I had sought out in uptown soirées and downtown brothels, but never with such absolute clarity. Those other women: they had been human approximations, evidence of the shadow that the lost gods of the perverse still sometimes cast upon this world. The young woman who ruled Cathay in all but name *was* the perverse. A goddess. The thing itself.

Turandot.

"You must prepare yourself," said Timur, the stony face at last giving vent to the seismic activity of his inner life. I could not speak; I felt the ground shift beneath me as I contended with my own emotional temblor. I gripped the handrail. The crowd's roar was almost as loud as my heart's.

The time had come. To perform. To accept. To bring to conclusion.

To expiate.

My contact was speaking, it seemed, from the far side of the universe, his words filtering through dust clouds, vast regions where different laws applied. "The gong. Set to. Go. Quick. Do not linger."

The princess looked down upon the scaffold, raised her hand and then let it drop.

Pu-tin-pao swung his blade, effecting a swift, elegant separation of head and body. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Timur's lips continue to move, but if his words had not been lost to the great swell of noise that greeted the decoliation, they would have been obscured almost as effectively by the thud of blood rushing through my inner ear.

The princess and her ladies were slipping away into the shadows. For an instant, she turned and looked down upon her people. Her face was like the risen moon, a satellite that had swung through the Big Night of my soul for over 70 years, raw, incandescent, terrifyingly pure, governing the ebb and flow of my life. I had had no more than a glimpse of her. A glimpse of black, corkscrew hair. Of full, parted lips. The glint of jewels and the sheen of white vestal robes cut with crimson. But that glimpse had been enough to assure me that the die was cast, and that my blood, denied its birthright for eight generations,

had come, if not yet into its human legacy, then into that other dark inheritance of my dreams.

I felt a hand upon my arm, urging me forward. The princess had disappeared. I turned; knew that my contact continued to speak only by the idle flapping of his lips; began to walk. My head was filled with such a commotion that I tottered. I was on the verge of insensibility and a spastic riot of limbs. Timur's eyes grew wide with alarm.

I shouldered him aside. The next moment, I was stumbling down the steps, giddy with desire and trepidation. I remember little of what followed. I cried out. I cried "Turandot! Turandot!" of that I am sure. Sure too that the crowd, whose baffled cries soon gave way to mockery, parted at my approach. *Another man fool enough to brave the princess's challenge*, was the general tenor of the uproarious commentary. *Let him pass. Let us be provided with further entertainment this beautiful night.*

I staggered through the gauntlet, emerging unscathed. None had deigned to touch me. For a moment, I spun on my heels, confused. Lantern-cast shadows lay all about. Then I looked up. The scaffold loomed, its greatest shadows reserved for those who dared breach its perimeter. I ducked beneath the circumscribing ropes and ran on unhindered. At last, I stood before the lustrous metal disc that was set to announce my fate. Taking up the gong-stick, I struck home, and heard a broad, mournful note resound throughout the square, informing Cambulac, imperial seat of Cathay, that I would submit to the Three Great Questions.

Who are we?

Where have we come from?

Where do we go?

The moon-flooded multitude had grown still. None spoke. The air was benumbed, infused with the opiate-like sonorousness of the gong. Its serial boom reverberated off the palace walls, and then, fading, became the ghost of a mantra chanted by those who had gone before. Those who had wagered all for the hand of Turandot.

"I had hardly taken you for a prince," said the concierge, raising his eyebrows and inspecting my tattered robe. I had endured his derision since checking in some days ago and was by now inured to it. I was somewhat surprised however to discover that my newly revealed status had not gone *some* way to having him modify his opinion of me. I stared back. The eyebrows drooped; his expression became self-reflective. He pushed the key under the grille. "I mean, this motel, it's —"

"It's seen better days?"

"I have heard the Darkling Isle has also seen better days," he shot back, obviously nettled, even though he usually made no secret of his abhorrence for his place of work.

"Perhaps if this prince weren't so impoverished, he would not have to risk his life," I said.

Somewhat mollified, the concierge nodded, in sage concession to plain speaking. "If I were an aristocrat like you, sir, I might also risk the princess's challenge. She is rich. Beautiful. And now that her father is in his dotage, she practically rules all Cathay. Poverty is a great inducement to love and terror. For myself" — he paused, and his

tired, suspicious eyes darted hither and thither – “I think I would do anything, so long as I could put my present life behind me.”

The motel was located amongst the slums of the Outer City. On entering Cambulac, it had provided me with the anonymity I had required. Now that I had declared my suit and earned a somewhat unenviable renown, it consolidated my cover. Only a prince or lord of painfully reduced circumstance would choose to win the Princess Turandot for his bride.

“Yes, yes, if I were you, sir, I might truly be tempted to take part in the princess’s bizarre, and, let it be said, altogether *wanton* challenge.” He whistled through his teeth. “Fourteen men dead at her hand, though! That’s enough to cool any man’s ardour. Ah, the empire is not what it was. It is consumed by a lust for cruelty and death. Consumed by the old, unspeakable desires of those who lived here before us.” Again, he glanced to and fro, his rheumy eyes lighting up with apprehension. But the lobby remained deserted. “I endanger myself by talking so freely. Yet what have I to lose? Even my daughter – ” I turned my back on him and began to walk down the corridor. “Have you seen her, sir?” he called after me. “Milord? Your Highness?” he added, perhaps in the event that, should I answer Turandot successfully, I would either forget his treacherous remarks, or award him a sinecure. “I hope the little chit doesn’t bother you? You have only to say, sir. She’s been a problem for us all.”

I continued on my way and was soon deep inside the motel’s fusty warren.

I stopped opposite my door. Heard a susurrations. Looked down. A cockroach emerged from the dirty plates stacked outside the adjoining room. I froze. The alluring bug tested the air with its feelers, then, after awarding me a look that seemed almost humanly cognizant of life’s tawdriness, scuttled across the tiles. As it passed close, almost arrogantly close, I attempted to treat it to the heel of my shoe, but it escaped through a hole in the wainscot. The motel was, it seemed, beneath even this lowly creature’s contempt.

If this were an omen, it was not one I cared to reflect upon. I could not bear to think that the princess might similarly escape me.

I turned the key in the lock and entered.

Looking about, I saw that my accommodation was as I had left it. I walked through the meagrely furnished dining area and into the bedroom. I opened the jalousie. Filled my lungs with fresh air.

The bedroom gave onto a quadrangle. Carts, jalopies and a few rusty electric vans were parked haphazardly between trashcans and fire escapes. Balconies, each one enclosed in an iron cage, rose before and to either side, festooned with lines of grubby washing. At night, the noise of arguing couples, crying infants and, on one occasion, the report of a handgun being discharged, had often made sleep impossible. But this morning all was quiet, and now that I had surrendered to my destiny, and no longer fretted quite so much about my mission and what I had been sanctioned to perform, I felt that quietness extend to my spirit. Soon, I told myself, I would know peace and sleep forever.

I turned. Slats of early morning light fell across the parquet, extending to where my suitcase lay open, still, for the most part, unpacked. I crossed the room and stood before the wardrobe. I slid back its door. The sole confidence I placed in the motel’s staff lay in their utter disregard for making up my room, indeed, for offering service of any kind, and not in any presumption of their honesty. But my uniform, I was relieved to discover, was undisturbed, as were my other valuables.

Slipping the indigenous robe off my shoulders, shuffling it to my ankles and then kicking the demeaning thing aside, I reached out and ran a finger down those emblems of my other self: the leather hose, doublet, riding boots, thick velvet cloak and cambric shirt that constituted the regimentals of a Captain of the Order of Black Knights. Then, taking them from their hangers, I laid them out on the unmade bed.

I proceeded to the shower. I wanted to look my best when I at last came face to face with Turandot. I lathered, washed, shaved, defecated and then somewhat neurotically washed again. Immediately after towelling myself off, I walked back to the bed and strapped on the uniform. The cloak I secured to a hook behind the bedroom door, ready for when I should leave. The sky was clear, but it was nearing the end of autumn, and the air had, of late, begun to pink at my skin.

There was one thing I lacked. The family heirloom, *Espiritu Santo*. But that mystic blade had been lost for centuries. The only weapon I would be allowed to carry into the palace would be its *reductio ad absurdum*.

I stretched out on the bed. The night had been taken up with satisfying court protocol. At noon, soldiers would arrive to escort me to the princess. I had barely four hours to prepare.

I had not intended to sleep, but merely to rest and mentally rehearse my lecture. Sleep, however, had been too long denied me; it admitted no counterfeit; like an abused whore, who could no longer be bought off, it demanded recompense in kind. I seem to recall that, dipping beneath the surface of consciousness, I encountered Pu-tin-pao, in his little apron, sharpening his sword. The scene also featured my dead wife and my estranged children and grandchildren. They entered stage left, knelt, then lowered their heads, napes exposed to the descending blade. The youngest – he who, if all went well, would become the next Lord Soho – peered up at me, and time came to a halt. Kicking, spluttering, gasping for air, I rose towards the light, and, opening my eyes, was confronted by the face of a girl peering round the connecting door.

“Oh, I’m sorry sir, I – ”

With a convulsive jerk, I sat up. “Who – ”

“I was going to clean your room, sir, I – ”

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood. The face before me: it was a mask, a hallucination, some kind of trick. It could not, I reasoned, be the face of the Princess Turandot. Yet it *was* her.

Did I still dream? I shook my head, clearing it of muzziness. No; I did not dream. This was one of those “across the room” moments such as I had experienced in the Darkling Isle, when, at a dinner party, I might find

myself confronted by a beauty who seemed the realization of my visions. Disappointment, on such occasions, was inevitable. Blinking, I would discover, soon enough, that I gazed upon a woman who, if stamped with the goddess's imprimatur, was flawed by a debt to humanity.

This little beauty, this girl who, even half-observed by the door, seemed as much an example of divine incarnation as the vicious young woman who ruled Cathay, was a qualitatively different kind of creature. I knew at once that, however much I might blink, I would never be disappointed, never discover that, on looking again, she was anything less than a distillation of my life's obsessions.

For, apart from the most obvious and cursory physical correlatives, there was really nothing human about her at all.

She came into the room. "Extraordinary," I murmured. It was not just her face, but her body, too, that approximated the princess's, though whereas Turandot had last night chosen to conceal herself in opalescent robes that seemed spun from moonbeams, her unacknowledged younger sister was turned out in the briefest and most shameless of rags. The penurious attire, along with the vulgarly applied make-up, suggested a sexual heat that had chosen to fan itself until it was on the brink of self-combustion. Had this chambermaid, I wondered, inadvertently afforded me a glimpse of the real Turandot? A Turandot who, perhaps, out of self-preservation, had attempted to conceal her own insatiability behind a glacial renown?

"I know," she said, with a sly grin, and looking me straight in the eye. "Everybody says it. I look like the princess." If somewhat more gloriously common, I thought. Her face became serious. "It's why I was expelled. Slave school's a real opportunity for girls like me. One day it's the slums, the next, the palace. Dad was really angry I flunked. But when the headmistress noticed I looked so much like *royalty* there was really only one way things could end. Now I help Dad out around the motel."

So this was the daughter of whom I had been warned.

"It's such a waste," she said, "because I know I'd have been a really good slave. I was born to it."

Born to it? And how many others of her kind had recently been born to it? Born to inherit the Earth? According to the Order, the perverse, so long in abeyance, had, in one generation, begun to manifest itself in Cathay as at no other time during the last 2,000 years.

Tentatively, with an exaggerated roll of her hips, she took a step forward. And then, lowering her gaze, so that she studied me through long, mascara-caked eyelashes, she took another step, the seesawing pelvis achieving a degree of angular displacement that human flesh could hardly be expected to contain.

The sound of her: the *click* then *clack* of her high-heeled sandals as they made their lazy, percussive overture across the floor; the protestation of silk against skin as it strove to constrain her absurdly curvaceous body.

The smell of her: cheap scent applied with plebeian liberality, combined with perspiration and the heady aroma of dirty hair – all in all, the perfume of the gutter.

And oh, the *sight* of her. The sight of that scrap of

clingy black chiffon. The single shoulder strap, so thin as to resemble an unwound thread. A neckline so low that, on the right side, where the strap's counterpart had snapped, fatigued, perhaps, after months of constraining the unconstrainable, the rouged areola of a breast all puppy-fat and buttermilk peeped insolently above the seam. The nipped waist gave way to runs, tears and ladders, where the tight, silken rag contended with the generous pelvic girdle, and then flared, in sublime ruination, over the gently-rounded belly. Clearly visible through the distressed, ultra-fine denier, the umbilicus, decorated with a big, red slug of costume jewellery, glowed like a hot coal. The hemline was also torn, but artfully so. It formed a V, the frayed topmost edges revealing the sharp hipbones, the nethermost tatters barely covering the black, closely-cropped fuzz of the pubic mound.

She stood before me, shifting her weight from one leg to the other, toying with the helical strands of her unkempt mane. In her neck, a pulsing, turquoise vein seemed to offer a correlative to the ever-quickenning tempo of my own blood and its polluted heritage. Then, sweeping the disordered mass of locks over her shoulders, she continued her advance.

"Who are we?" I mumbled, unconsciously rehearsing the catechism I would soon have to answer in earnest.

"I'm Liù," she said, pursing her plump, glossy lips. She might have been weaned on a diet of crushed strawberries whose dye had proved indelible. "Who are *you*, stranger?"

"I'm not sure," I murmured, a stab of fear in my bowels. "At times like this, I'm not sure who or what any of us are."

I was being a little disingenuous. If my own heritage was something of an enigma, even to me, then hers was clear. In the interregnum of irrationality that divided the Ancient and Modern, when mankind's perception of the world had become so skewed that it turned its back on its accumulated wisdom and embraced the dark joys of animality, various races of hybrids, known as the tribes of the perverse, had roamed the Earth.

"Sharkmen, bear-men, insect-men," I numbly declaimed, more to myself than her, remembering all that the Order had taught me. "And swangirls, fishgirls, sophisticated but down-and-dirty foxgirls, grisettes such as belonged to the Way of the Cat and Rat..."

Not that Liù belonged to any of those extinct genera.

No; Liù had roachgirl blood in her veins.

Her ancestors had been the lowest of the low, so aberrant that they had not been officially classified a "tribe," even by their fellow outlaws. But for me the *roach* was the only genus – despite the undoubted attractions of those other pedigrees of girl – that had ever been worth studying.

"Oh what are you, who are also my beloved Turandot," I whispered, "and what manner of creature am I?"

I was human. But the perverse, latent in me since birth, just as it was latent, these days, in all humanity, had become manifest and demanded my allegiance. I had surrendered to it. That was all I knew. I had no tribe. I had no extra-human identity. No reshaped forebears to

call my own, except they be orc: those degenerate creatures living beneath the Earth's surface.

The chambermaid pressed herself against me, as if determined to heal the schism in my soul, that fundamental breach in my being. Then, raising herself on tip-toe, her arm snaked about my neck, and pulled my mouth down onto her own.

And finally, the taste of her, the feel of her, all five senses conspiring to undermine my humanity, to turn me back into that bestial man who would creep from his home and seek kisses, blood and female lamentation in the slums and ghettos of the Darkling Isle's wastes. That mouth: it was sweetened as if by an appalling diet of lollipops, sherbet, bubblegum and candyfloss. My tongue was some blind, famished beast that groped its way through a ransacked confectioners. Yet that candied succulence was underpinned by a base note of something darker, something bitter, something gross. The mouth closed, became a vacuum, my tongue sucked into its pink cavern so violently that I thought it might be torn from its ligaments. The sweetness was gone, and her taste had become unrelievedly pungent, the back of her throat like a sewer or drain slicked with her verminous essence. I bent over her a little more and placed a hand on her thigh, fingers closing upon the fringe of silk that played over the knobby articulation of her pelvis.

Her crimson fingernails dug into my leather hose. Then, ascending, they slipped beneath the doublet and shirt, scarifying my chest with slow, deliberate artistry. And if I knew it was inevitable that the impression I had hoped to make at court would be compromised by bloody telltale signs of having recently consorted with the city's lowlife, then I did not, at that moment, care.

Suddenly, she drew back, our mouths disengaging with an audible implosion of air. Her face was flushed, twitchy, pettish, giving her the aspect of a child who had got up from her sick bed before she ought to, to wander about the house in a feverish daze. She placed her hand on my solar plexus and gave me a little push. So weakened was I from her embrace that I immediately sat down upon the bedside chair to my rear.

"You want a shine?"

"A shine?" I replied, somewhat perplexed.

She looked down through corkscrews of dishevelled hair, longingly. She was inspecting my boots. "You've got a big day ahead of you. I can make your boots look really nice. It takes time, of course. Licking just gets the dirt off. It's necessary that I cover the leather with my vaginal secretions and then buff it with my *mons veneris* to work up a shine of truly martinet gorgeousity. Is that okay?" Before I had chance to reply, she concluded, and somewhat peripherally, I would have thought: "You're English, aren't you?"

I was a little taken aback. "Yes," I said. "How —"

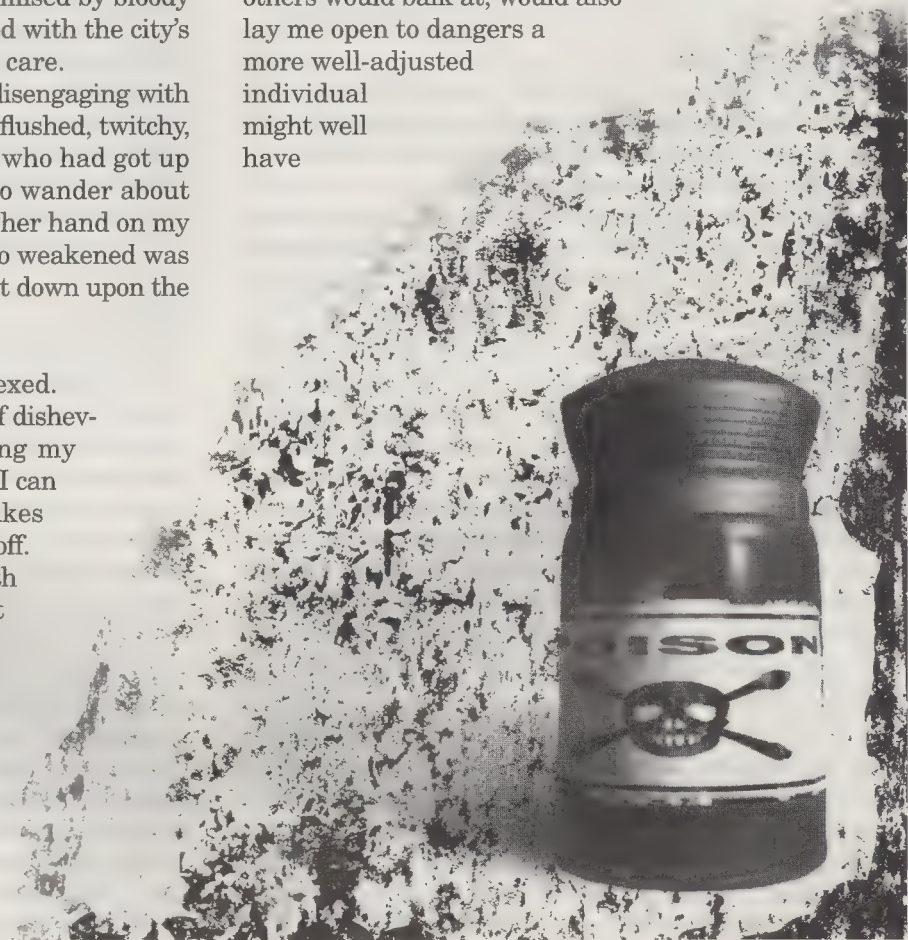
"Word gets round pretty quickly. But I sort of had you figured out long

ago. Didn't have to hear it on the street. First time I saw that uniform in your wardrobe I just went crazy." Room service had not, it seemed, been quite so unobtrusive as I had wished.

"You know this uniform?" I said, concerned. "You know what it implies?" Centuries ago the Order had been persecuted, disbanded, and, to all purposes, forgotten. I had not thought it possible that, here, on the other side of the world, mere threads, buckles and a studded codpiece might provoke an ignorant slave girl to an intimation that I was more than I claimed to be, even if such girls *do* understand something about leather, its mystery and implications, that the average woman or man often fails to grasp. "*Do you know this uniform and what it means?*" I repeated, with emphasis, to the lust-deafened girl.

"It means you're like me," she said. "You have the dark fire in your veins. A girl can tell these things." She really was too much to the point, as pert as she was perspicacious. I strove to calm myself. She knew nothing, doubtless, of the wider world, and, while speculation about my origins could hardly be avoided, I felt it unlikely she was capable, or even interested, in discovering the truth: that is, that I belonged to a secret society dedicated to upholding the ways of man in the face of the perverse.

I should have dismissed the girl. But if she was not part of the common order of things, then neither was I. They had looked for a sick, sick man to take on this mission, and — all credit to their thoroughness — had chosen me. I wondered whether they had known that that sickness, though it might spur me to do things others would balk at, would also lay me open to dangers a more well-adjusted individual might well have



been able to resist.

"So much leather," she giggled, looking me over from toe to crown, "and so little time." Again, she surveyed me, her gaze lingering, this time, over my crotch. "Oh mercy me" – her giggles threatening to become uncontrollable – "how *codlicious*."

I cast my gaze from the failed slave to the leather-shrouded object of her scrutiny. Sir John, my peccant ally, who was destined to be such a woe and wonder to the world. He was of late, alas, too often the object of ridicule. It was I alone who accorded him that "Sir"; to the rest of the world, certainly to those women I had consorted with outside the purview of brothels, he had always been plain Mr Thomas.

I stood up, took a step forward, grabbed her by the hair and twisted a length of greasy tresses about my fist. Her mouth opened wide, so wide, in fact, that I heard her jaw emit a subtle crack over her gasp of anticipation. She surely believed that I meant to force her down and take her with deliciously unnecessary brutality. Instead, I pushed her away, so that she stumbled backwards to come to rest half-leaning against the dresser, leaving, in my knotted hand, a few inky locks, and, in my knotted stomach, a pain that was unfamiliar: that of self-denial.

What a bore sex was. And when not a bore, what a horror.

I strove to ignore Sir John's barked imprecations and let him fret in his dark place of confinement, there to gnash his teeth and mourn that he no longer enjoyed the freedom that had been his in the Darkling Isle. My family had been promised much if I should fulfil my calling. Delicacy, professional delicacy, would, I decided, inform my actions till the end.

"You don't want to fuck me?" she said, neither incredulous, angry, nor bemused, her voice invested only with the sexual need that would long ago have burnt away all other aspects of her personality.

"Do you know who I am, little girl?" I said, careless, then, of who I was or had been. Tired of life. This mission. Everything. "My name is Richard Pike, tenth of that line. Lord Soho, if not for the machinations of my family's enemies."

Her expression was as inane as porcelain. Not because she had withdrawn into herself – an interiority that consists merely of sexual appetite offers little sanctuary – but because, rejected, with her lust momentarily spiked, there was nothing left to animate her.

If she could not give me physical satisfaction, then she would, I decided, provide me with a sounding board for the relief of my overburdened soul. She was nothing. A shell. Of no import and of no consequence. How had it been possible that I had ever thought she might pose a threat?

"My erstwhile life was fake," I said. "As inauthentic as the role I have been forced to play, here, in Cambulac. It had to end." I gazed into the fly-specked pier glass that stood opposite, to one side of the dresser. An unnaturally youthful 80-year-old in black leather stared back, his grey face lined, pocked and brindled with the hereditary curse of the Pikes. I began to wonder where I had put my hypodermic. The drug that had shaved half a century off my appearance needed to be administered twice a day.

That drug was killing me, of course, even as it lent me its vital lie. But that was of no consequence. I had time enough. Time enough to renounce the fraudulence of my life and embrace, once and for all, the only thing about me that had ever been real.

I extended a hand. The slave girl took a few steps forward, stopped, then lowered her head so that she might press her cheek against the metacarpus. Her skin, if no longer flushed by the urgency of desire, was almost equally hectic with rouge, but cool, strangely cool.

In me, the human is an unpredictable element. It rose, now, displacing the perverse. I heaved, a dry sob contorting my chest. But I was otherwise silent. And still.

I knew I could rely on Liù not to cry. And self-control had nothing to do with it. Just as girls such as her knew fear, but not terror, obsession, but not love, so too they knew self-pity, but not the true sorrow that culminates in weeping. And I thought *How sad. To be so beyond tears. To be so beyond childhood, that its loss is impossible to recall*. The coolness transfused itself through my hand. I thought of my own childhood in Epping and Oxford, the ridiculous dream I had had that I might myself become Lord Soho. A dream blighted by the creeping realization that I was damned. The coolness deepened. Her flesh was like ice. With the prospect of carnality gone, and therefore, the life gone too, Liù was a living corpse, her flesh as impersonal as chitin.

"Poor little cockroach," I said.

"I know," she said. "I know what I am. They told me at school. I'm not Liù. Not really. I'm not even a slave. I'm something lower. A roachgirl."

I sat down again and leaned back in the chair, relinquishing my role as comforter. "Your ancestors," I said, "unlike other tribes, could not reproduce. Born to humans, they were considered spontaneous mutations – of the perverse, but not belonging to it. A bastard tribe, if you will. Midwives, faced with these abominations, would consign the newborn hybrids to the sewers, and there, beneath the world's great cities, they learned to survive. The other species of the perverse always regarded them with contempt."

"Don't you like cockroaches?"

"I do like them. More than you know. They've been my reason for living. Roachgirls are so... so very beautiful," I said, not wanting to estrange her further by explaining that, just as some boys will take to natural history, and collect insects in specimen jars, then so too will other boys delight in subjecting those same little creatures to excruciations, plucking off their wings, and then their legs, one by one, before cremating them beneath a magnifying glass. "Very beautiful, indeed. And even if the other female tribes were not extinct, I would still dedicate myself to the most despised of their number. For if roachgirls were never fully recognized as a genus, I recognize you as such. You can keep your catgirls, ratgirls, fishgirls and she-spiders. I sing the order Blattaria! The *Blatella germanica*, the *Blatella asahinai*, and, of course" – I leaned forward; she bent down to meet me; I gave her nose a playful tweak – "the *Blatta orientalis*!"

She pulled back her lips, exposed her teeth and hissed

with mock-insect pleasure.

"The princess is a cockroach too, isn't she?"

"Of course," I said. "Whether born in a palace or in the gutter, perverse little girls like you are *always* roaches, for these days the roachgirl is the sole form by which the perverse can express itself. The other tribes are gone, like the dodo, the roc and the tyrannosaur. But the genotype of the roach has survived, living on within the physical and imaginative corpus of humanity and waiting only for some freak mutation of genes to herald its rebirth."

"And the princess," she said, kneeling between my outstretched feet and sitting back on her heels. "She's *pure* cockroach?" A frown of dark suspicion creased her brow.

"A pure human-cockroach hybrid. Such as existed in the Dark Ages. A rare thing, these days. Perhaps a thing unmatched. The world must certainly hope so."

"And that's why you prefer her to me? Because I'm more human than roach? Is that what you're saying?"

"Given the fact that you so resemble the princess, I think it likely you are far more roach than human. But you are not as those who lived in the Dark Ages. The perverse, in you, is distilled. But strong, nevertheless. Very strong. You are, in fact, the most desirable roachgirl I have ever encountered in the flesh."

Her eyebrows – just visible beneath the curlicues of her bangs – became set in an attitude of childlike concentration. She pouted, and looked away, affectedly holding a hand before her face to study her manicure. "Then why don't you *fuck* me?" she said, with a mortified huff.

I made a steeple of my hands and rested my chin on the ragged, keratin finial. "I can't," I said. "I have to save myself for the one who is destined to be my bride."

"I'm *desirable*, but not roachgirl enough for a man of your discriminating tastes, is that it?" she said, with a most un-slave like flash of anger. "Not *pure* enough. Too human. Just a dumb chambermaid. Well, I hope your blue-blooded floozie gives you what you're looking for. I can't. It seems I don't have enough *insect* in me." She met my eyes, hurt, yet defiant. "I won't forget you," she concluded. "I won't."

It was still early morning, but I decided it would be wise to make an exit. "It's a matter of politics," I said, getting up and taking out my pocket-watch as I stepped over her hunched, shivering body. She held her face in her hands, and contrary to my predictions, she did indeed seem to cry. "We are pawns. Both of us. It is by sacrifice, and sacrifice alone, that we can hope to win. And now, my dear, if you will excuse me –"

If sex was a bore, a trial, a horror, then so too, it seemed, was conscience.

Behind me, some boys busied themselves putting my lectern in place. I coughed, to test the hall's acoustics. Finding them satisfactory, I rolled my notes into a scroll and held them behind my back. Then, raising my heels off the floor, I rocked to and fro and surveyed my surroundings.

Court officials swarmed across the concourse. They gathered about the imperial dais at the opposite end of the hall, their ranks swelling by the minute.

"It'll be either a funeral or a wedding, that's for sure," said one mandarin to another as they proceeded towards the dais, oblivious of whether or not I overheard. "But we must I suppose be thankful that in this life there are still *some* certainties." There were, of course, some things I was certain of, too, though I could not bring myself to be thankful. The certainty, for instance, that I would not be going home, even if I should succeed in the trial. It didn't matter. Home was not to be found in this world. Or even in this universe.

More officials were entering the hall. Some cast me a quick, impatient glance, as if they had grown weary of supervising the princess's charades, and the men who, in volunteering themselves, perpetuated them. Others swapped infantile jokes about those who had lost their heads over the princess "both figuratively and literally." And a few of the older, braver men reminisced about the Middle Kingdom as it had been in the emperor's time, before its renaissance of learning had, in this generation, been threatened by a second coming of the perverse. "Perhaps it would be some kind of salvation," said one such elder statesman, "if the princess surrendered. After all, love may provide not merely personal deliverance, but prove conducive to the restitution of the commonweal. At least, it may prove so for those of us who still believe and place our hopes in the rediscovery of Man."

Trumpets sounded. Men and women hurried to their stations. Conversation ceased. The hall was quiet, still and possessed of ominous lucidity.

The assembly bowed. Altoum, the emperor, had entered by a side door.

With the assistance of several bearers, the old man climbed to the top of the dais and assumed the throne. His only child followed, her retinue in close attendance. I had heard that the emperor, agonizing over his daughter's loyalty, sought comfort in the spies he had seconded to her entourage. Studying the ranks of her bodyguard, ladies-in-waiting and slaves, I could see that many were indeed human. Human and non-human alike, however, were left at the foot of the dais. Turandot ascended towards the emperor alone.

She seated herself upon the penultimate step. There was a hush. Then the thrice-made salutation of "Ten Thousand Years!" filled the hall, the dying traces of that great cry ringing in my ears long after the court dignitaries had taken to their seats.

"Son of Heaven, I ask to prove myself," I said. Despite the roachgirls who constituted the princess's harem of slaves – beautiful vermin all – I had eyes only for their exemplar, the princess herself, and was oblivious to Altoum until she chose to turn her head and look up at him. Warily, he nodded, and, with a barely perceptible flick of his hand, signalled that the trial should begin.

The princess got to her feet and took a few steps down the dais. And then, for the first time, her gaze met my own.

"Two thousand years ago," she said, and I realized, then, that not just her face and body, but her voice, too, evinced that it was the archetype of the "roach motel's" chambermaid, if enjoying a greater degree of elocutionary refinement, "when Cathay was still home to the

tribes of the perverse, my ancestress, Lou-ou-ling, last empress of Albracca, was ravished by a conquering warlord of Atlantis, and died a horrible death. To her memory I have consecrated my maidenhead, that no human will think the New Cathay I intend to build may be so easily overcome. So it is I say that no man will ever possess me unless he correctly answers the Three Great Questions. Think well before you make your attempt. The questions are three, but there is only one death."

She was more beautiful than the visions I had had of her in sleep, or that sometimes swarmed about me in the treacherous shadowlands of daytime; more beautiful than when I had seen her picked out by moonlight on the palace battlements. My throat tightened. And my heart beat so fast that I grew giddy. Not even an intimate encounter with a body double, such as Liù, could assuage the shock of confronting her at such close quarters. I feared that I might be unable to continue.

Her headdress was like the translaterally arranged crest of a monstrous cockatoo, betokening her equally monstrous royalty. Her diaphanous shift resembled a shroud. It was similar to the garment Liù had worn, except it fell from neck to floor, and was as intact as her redoubtable hymen. Beneath: anklets, belly-chains and necklaces jingled faintly against what must have been perpetually quivering flesh. Jewels that coruscated like a new constellation fated to crowd the familiar, human lights from the sky. If Liù had been a glorification of the kind of seductiveness that wretches such as myself called "cheap and nasty," then Turandot was its apotheosis. It was as if I viewed Liù through some magic lens that magnified "the cheap" until it shone with numinous inner light.

"Who are we?" said the princess.

Then, after a short pause: "Where have we come from?"

And finally, a malicious smile enlivening a face that was like that of a child who had larded herself with her big sister's make-up and was playing at being the Bad Witch: "Where do we go?"

I composed myself, stepped behind the lectern, took my pince-nez from a breast pocket and spread out my notes.

I cleared my throat. "Who are we?" you say." I looked up, letting my gaze linger on the princess, and then let it roam freely among the assembled courtiers. "Some would have it that we are not human, that we mimic humanity, but are dissociated from its template, that that template is lost, or even shattered, and that what is left is a mockery of its original. But since we have, these days, little notion of what that original was, except, sometimes, from the archaeological record, I will continue to use the word 'human,' at least, when referencing creatures such as myself, Calaf, Prince of the Darkling Isle, 15th in line to the throne of Her Majesty Queen Berenice the Second. When referencing *your* kind, however" – and I awarded the princess a cursory nod – "I must be more exact." My arm sawed through the air. "Look about this hall. Here we may find Europeans, such as myself, and Atlanteans and Africans, too, as well as Cataians. Yet we are indistinguishable. For just as the Earth's once disparate languages have coalesced, so have those races of humanity that, in the Ancient world, were classified as

Mongol, Caucasian, Atlantean, Ethiopian and Malay. There is, nevertheless, princess, a clear division between, say, a Cataian, such as yourself, and me. Why is this?"

The princess folded her arms. I readjusted my pince-nez and once more turned to my notes.

"The division I speak of is, of course, the one that cleaves sapient life into the camps of humanity and the perverse. In the dark days of the interregnum that division was profound. Some two-and-a-half thousand years ago, as the Princess Turandot has reminded us, the perverse colonized Cathay; it was, for centuries, a stronghold of fox-people, cat-people, shark-people and all the rest of those hybrid fabrications that were the physical correlatives of alien desires. But after Cathay fell to human armies, a diaspora of the perverse spread out over the Earth's surface, eventually taking refuge underground.

"There, the tribes mutated, and became a single tribe, who, unseen for over a dozen generations, but still, it is to be believed, lurking hundreds of miles beneath our feet, have, for the most part, passed into legend. We call them goblins, orcs, and, today, the mention of them scares only our children and babes. We have, in effect, forgotten them. Their progeny, however, still walk among us: descendants of creatures born of couplings between humans and non-humans, men and women whose bloodline is polluted with traces of the perverse."

Somewhat self-consciously, I once more raised my eyes. But my orc-heritage was as inscrutable, I deemed, as my identity as a black knight. For in me, the human and the orc met in a seamless celebration of the simply *ugly*. The princess remained impassive, seemingly unconcerned at what I had said. I had, after all, only reiterated what was general knowledge. My predecessors had had little trouble with this initial hurdle, and she doubtless considered my oration no cause for immediate alarm.

"Who are we?" you say. You too, princess, are the result of a forgotten act of miscegenation, a coupling between the royal house of Albracca and a human. Over 2,000 years later, the pollution should have been so diluted as to be insignificant. That is, after all, the way it has been for much of humanity, most of whom would find it hard to gainsay the evidence that they carried the dregs of a sleeping perversity in their veins, but who nevertheless live fully human lives. In this generation, however, a curious teratogenesis has occurred throughout Cathay. A multitude of throwbacks have been born, humans who have reverted to the genotype of distant forebears. Most still have vestiges of humanity about them, but sometimes one is born for whom 2,000 years of history might as well not have taken place, an individual in whom the fires of the perverse burn with a terrible purity. It has been the fate of Cathay that one such rare individual is the heir to the Celestial Throne. Today, a young woman who follows the Way of the Cockroach again rules a quarter of the world."

Her hands came together in slow, derisive applause, her dismissive smile as cruel as formerly. No doubt she considered my answer too pat, too predictable, to give her reason to suppose I might succeed with her next question.

"Where have we come from?" she said.

I cleared my throat, the echo loud in the stilled, expectant air.

"Men of learning tell us that the Ancient world was infected with psychic particulates emanating from a parallel universe that had suffered cataclysm. These shards and fragments of alien perceptions and desires changed us, irrevocably. For such reason our descendants chose to remake themselves, so that their bodies conformed to the new sexual imperatives that had been instilled into their minds and souls. But what was that world, the universe that, in its destruction and collapse, adumbrated what we are today? Few are brave enough to guess. But those of us in whom the perverse burns bright have atavistic dreams. And visions. What is your earliest memory, princess?"

Jack and Jill went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water,
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And Jill came tumbling after.

At the age when you first heard that rhyme, you couldn't decide whether you were Jill or Jack, could you? You knew only that the essence of your universe was pain. And calamity."

The princess had grown pale. She held a set of knuckles to her mouth, and bit at them with her small, bright teeth, lipstick traces lending the illusion that they had been worried to the bone. Some of the courtiers leaned forward in their seats, stirred from their torpor. I had begun to encroach upon dark, unknown territory. It was I who held the initiative now. I felt emboldened, determined to press on until I laid the secrets of this land called "Turandot" bare.

"At about the age of five, a fissure opened up in the bedrock of your reality. And something erupted from your covert, subterranean self, to forever after haunt you with hot, dark dreams. It whispered. It sang. It warned. It praised. You heard it in nursery rhymes and recognized its call in the illustrated books that your governess would read to you before you went to sleep. Since that age, you have lived in two worlds: this universe, where you find yourself exiled, and the universe to which your soul belongs, the dead universe that has appeared to you in dreams and longings."

I gripped the lectern's sides. The wood creaked under the pressure. My cheeks had begun to burn.

"As you grew, so did those dreams intensify, and so did that other universe's imperatives wax irresistible." I pushed my notes to one side. I had no need of such formalities now. I would improvise. For when I talked of Turandot, I talked of myself.

"Nursery rhymes and fairy tales lost all traces of innocence. You turned to paintings, music, philosophy, the incunabula, and similarly found these artefacts of the human genius to be limned with the dark, abiding beauty of your lost home. Nothing was untainted. Nothing was humanly pure. Wherever you turned, you saw, heard, thought and read of pain, disgrace and abjection, and knew these things to be signposts pointing the way back

to the one place where you could realize yourself, but which was to be forever denied you. Life has always had that bittersweet tang of knowing that you do not belong, has it not? That you owe your nature to a world that exists only in your imagination? As you grew, from child to querulous teenager, so did your plans. For to survive on this adopted world called Earth you knew it would be necessary to transform it. To colonize it, if you will, just as your ancestors did millennia ago: by using your authority to draw together other spontaneous mutations who shared your vision of imposing upon the world of their captivity the semblance of their dead, forgotten origins: a universe outside space and time which yet demanded rebirth. And it has been in this endeavour, princess, this dark but, if I may say, heroic endeavour, that we have learned not just who you are, but *where you have come from*."

The princess turned to her father. "He knows me," she said, in an urgent whisper. "Stop him. Stop him before it's too late."

The emperor shook his head. "No," he said, with what almost seemed a grim smack of pleasure. "I may not violate the sacred honour of the trial. He may proceed."

Once more she folded her arms across her chest. Her brilliant eyes sought my own, as if she were contriving to blind me with some last, desperate flash of ocular haughtiness. But when she delivered her last challenge, the disdain she had meant to communicate was hopelessly undermined by the tremulousness of her voice.

"Where do we go?"

I attempted to rearrange my papers into some kind of order. But my hands shook with such violence that the task defeated me. My disquiet was a match for her own. Sweeping everything onto the floor I closed my eyes and relied on memory and instinct.

"Where? It follows, from my previous answer, that where you *hope* to go is where we, or rather some of us, have already been. The Earth has been colonized before, by the alien universe of which you, princess, are a scion. It achieved this by infecting the human world with visions and desires radically different from humanity's own, yet, at the same time, so abominably familiar, that they found a ready place in the hearts and minds of something like a half of the Earth's population. The influence of the perverse waned, until the descendants of those reshaped humans we call 'the tribes' became either extinct, or lost to the Netherworld beneath our feet. But the coming of a generation of genetic throwbacks, such as now infests Cathay, allows us to consider the almost unthinkable possibility of the Earth's *recolonization*."

"It is, of course, your most fervent hope, princess, that the children of the perverse – of which you are, if I may say, such a paragon – may again assume their rightful place on the surface of the Earth. A glory it will be for you if you are successful, if a tragedy for the human race. Humanity, after all, has recently begun to rediscover *its* true origins. During the high days of the perverse, objective knowledge was at a premium, and all science and technology lost. For when your kind are in the world, mankind's perceptions become skewed. Humans cease to recognize the nature of

their own universe, seeing it only through the dark veil that was cast over us when a transdimensional cataclysm brought the ancient world to an end under a rain of strange lusts, rape and atrocity. My kind, that is, *mankind*, and your kind, princess, cannot, it seems, live together other than in a state where one party is either dominant or submissive.

"But I ask you: Do you really want this victory? Have you ever *truly* wished to dominate the Earth? Have you not known, princess, from the earliest age, that the thing you desire above all else, is not triumph – no, no, not triumph at all – but annihilation? *Where do we go?*" you ask. There is no turning back the clock. Mankind goes on to rediscover itself, and you, princess, go to your doom. Such will it be for all your kind. And such is your kind's deepest, most secret wish. Death. The ecstasy of death. And a final, dreamless sleep."

And such, I thought, is it for my kind too. No matter if the perverse, in my own veins, were so thinned by time that I qualified as human. I knew her, as she had said. And I knew, even before I stared down the length of the hall and saw her kneeling before her father, devastated, frightened, confused, that I had answered correctly and had won.

"Don't abandon me to him," she said. "Help me, Daddy! Do something."

The emperor glanced down at the scribe who had hurried to the foot of the dais.

"Do the answers tally with the parchments?"

"They do," said the scribe, his dolefulness as unconvincing as the emperor's chaste, disinterested concession to duty.

"Then the Princess Turandot must accept the prescribed edict: that she give herself to this man, Prince Calaf of the Darkling Isle." The emperor seemed eminently pleased with the proceedings, and so did many of his courtiers. Marriage, they would have reasoned, would be sure to clip the princess's wings, the ambitious, over-reaching beat of which had lately cast the shadow of madness across all Cathay.

I think she detected the suppressed laughter. Laughter that threatened to well up and resound throughout the hall. For when she got to her feet, her face betrayed the angry realization that she had been the agent of her own undoing. That, perhaps, she had always meant to be undone, but had never known it. Until now.

Fists clenched and held at her sides, her small body tense, she seemed determined that her reputation as an ice maiden should not be sullied by some inadvertent signal that she was prepared to yield. Her perversity, however, could not be so easily denied. It demanded its place in the scheme of things. She relaxed, her cold exterior melting before my eyes, her body, grown fluid, and urgent of line and curve, a glaring advertisement to the measure of delight she took in her *débâcle*.

But she would not, I knew, yield without a fight.

"Would you, verbose dog that you are, take me in your arms by force?"

A dislocation occurred then, at a depth, that, if not unplumbed, had not been explored for years, a depth

almost fathomless; and if the rupture had not enjoyed precedent – had I not only that morning experienced, with Liù, the unpredictable resurgence of my humanity? – it would either have so astonished me as to unseat my reason, or gone unapprehended. If, at an early age, a fissure had opened up in the Princess Turandot's sense of reality, and something alien had entered her, then I too had been similarly invaded, with the difference that my human self had never been entirely relinquished, nor had it chosen, of its own volition, to abandon me in disgust. Buried, it yet sometimes became so strong as to predominate, and I would undergo a shift of character so radical that it would be as if I had awoken from a dream, that other, cruel, perverted self unsubstantial, ludicrous, even.

It awoke now. Unsure suddenly of who exactly I was, I felt unaccountably sorry for the young woman against whom I had prevailed, knowing, as I did, what was to be her fate when I indeed took her, by force or otherwise. My "better self" was, perhaps, in the ascendant for no more than a handful of seconds; but it was enough to disrupt my sense of mission. The prospect that, earlier, would have sent ripples of thrilling anticipation through my body – the prospect of bedding Turandot – filled me instead with horror, as if I stood on a precipice, whereupon one wrong move would send me hurtling into a void, where I would know neither friendship, love nor any other human sympathy.

"No, exalted Princess," I said, drawing back from the imagined abyss, "I want you burning with love. I will return to you this evening. If you can, by sunset, learn my name, my true name, I will relinquish my claim to you and accept death."

With a sweep of my cloak I walked out of the hall, the confused squawks and hollers of the multitude of bureaucrats I had left behind rising in volume with each step I took.

It was not until I was in the street, with heralds already pronouncing Turandot's decree – that under pain of death, no one in Cambulac should rest until Prince Calaf's true name was discovered – that the balance between human and non-human levelled out in me and I came to a full understanding of my rashness. I remembered my encounter with Liù, and what I had told her. "*Do you know who I am, little girl?*" I had said, betrayed as much by my human side as I had been in the Great Hall of the People. "*My name is Richard Pike, tenth of that line.*" I had bested the Princess Turandot only to throw the prospect of enjoying her to the winds.

Would Liù talk?

My experience of the Darkling Isle's own breed of slave girl is that, though rarely evil, they are often mischievous. Exhibitionists, as fundamentally infantile as they are animalistic, they desire constant attention. Being looked at, arousing concupiscence – the grand, universal itch – is, for them, as much a source of pleasure as the autoerotic routines of their wardrobe and toilette, or being commanded by, indulged, and played with by their feared but adored Masters. But when they are denied, when they feel a man's eyes stray, and their coquetry, as they perceive it, is defied and rejected in the

manner in which I had rejected Liù's, then they will seek to reacquire attention by an act of disobedience or even treachery.

The passing automobiles filled the air with dust, obscuring the meaner forms of transport that an impecunious prince might be expected to employ. At last, I sighted and then waved down a palanquin. Scrambling inside, I curtly instructed my bearers to take me to my motel.

I was no longer on a level playing field. I no longer battled for the humans. My other self had come to the rescue. I knew, quite simply, that I would have to kill the little slave, before she volunteered my name, or before the princess's guards could interrogate her.

I stood outside my rooms. The door, I had discovered, was unlocked. I had told the concierge that I wished to speak with his daughter, and to bring her at once. Having recently heard of my success, and realizing that he spoke to a man who was about to become a power in the land, he had been eager, disgustingly eager, to comply. Surely, I thought, pushing the door open with the toe of my boot and stepping uneasily into the cloistered shadows, surely he hadn't been so expeditious as to send his daughter on ahead of me with the passkey?

Evidently he had. The drapes had been pulled, and even though the late afternoon sun could not be accused of untoward intrusiveness, I knew her immediately, even in the shadows. She lay on the bed, naked, her attitude somewhat curious, like that of a fairground contortionist, or a child felled by a pathological identification with a broken, favourite doll. I edged towards her, conscious that something was not right, but unable, for the moment, to make capital of my misgivings.

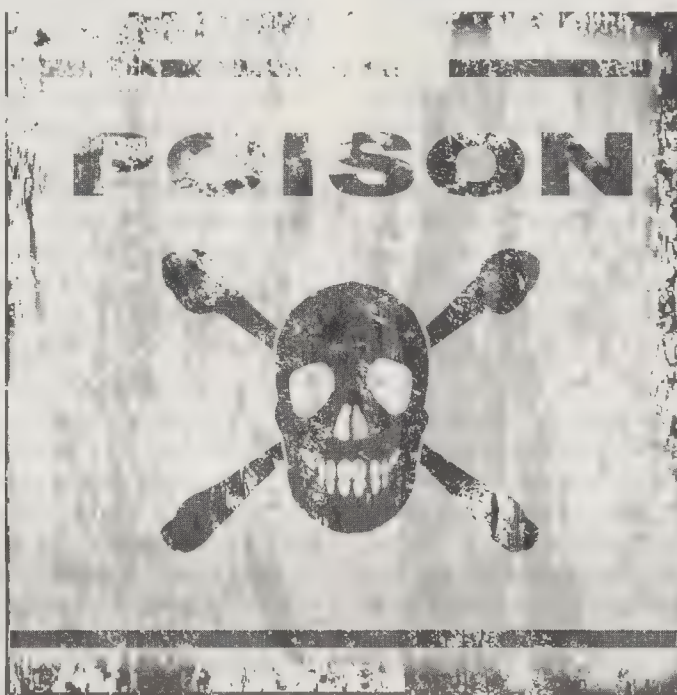
She was supine, calves tucked under her spread thighs, the high heels of her sandals furrowing the perfect hemispheres of her buttocks. The head rested on a pillow, her arms turned out in the fifth position of classical ballet, *en haut*, the fingers, with their long, red nails, tangled amid the halo of wild, corkscrew tresses. Her eyes were closed; a film of sweat glistened on her body. And when her chest heaved, and her breasts rose into the air, high, then higher on the swell of her ribcage – the deeply-indented navel turned into a taut ellipsis by the unnaturalness of her repose – her habitual, scratchy breathing would transform itself into desperate gasps for air.

As I drew nearer I saw that she was not completely naked, but wore the elements of what might have been

some kind of masquerade costume. Thin metal stalks protruded from her forehead, fastened to a chamois headband. Secured to her back by means of a long, silver body-chain that snaked under her breasts, disappeared below, and then resurfaced over her hips to meet up at the fork of her crotch before again disappearing into the cleft of her buttocks, was an amberous, thickly-padded cloak, the convex profile of which would have given me the impression that she sought to imitate an upturned turtle, if I had not already guessed the truth of the matter. The masquerade costume was a hastily assembled, home-made homage to her genus, and, in wearing it, Liù had attempted to assume the appearance, not of a turtle, but of a gigantic cockroach.

Then I saw the empty bottle by her side. The powder stains about her mouth.

I leaned over her. She opened her eyes. "Is this how you like me?" she said. "It's my own creation. A style I call *roach motel*."



I glanced away, and, lifted somewhat out of time by my discovery, spent seconds, minutes, long minutes, perhaps, staring at the unstoppered bottle. Its label, surmounted by a skull and crossbones, read INSECTICIDE. After a while my attention shifted. On the edge of the counterpane was a sheet of paper. It lay next to the piece of cheap paste jewellery that had doubtless been precipitated from her navel by abdominal contractions that, initially at least, must have been extremely violent. I retrieved the fake gem,

pocketed it, and then reached out and grabbed the paper. Shaking it free of its creases, and in so doing, peppering myself with dots of bug powder, I saw at once that it was a suicide note: "*I killed myself because I was expelled from school. I would have made a good slave, too. I was born to it. The prince isn't to blame. I just wanted him to know the way I feel. The way I feel about all men in uniform...*" Propped against the brass bedstead were a few fluffy toys, a doll attired in the kind of black, chiffon rag she had herself worn only that morning – it reminded me somewhat of the doll I had had in childhood whom I had named Flagelleta – and a few sacramentalized objects taken from my own wardrobe, including my spare codpiece and belt. They constituted the impromptu altar she had sacrificed herself to.

"You're the Princess Turandot's now," she mumbled. "Soon, I'll lose you forever. Me, I'm not even a slave. Not a real one at least. I'm just a piece of trash, I know that,

just a rotten girl-cockroach. But even a failed slave can be a princess for a day if she's willing to give her all. And you like cockroaches, *mmm*? At least, I think you're the kind of man who likes them when they've been condemned. And this motel is condemned. Or should be. And all the little roaches in it."

It was all highly fortuitous, of course. A death, a silence, and a suicide note absolving me from all blame. But she seemed to be taking a long time to go to slave heaven. Time enough for the princess's guard to torture my name out of her.

Her eyes closed. She seemed to sink into a deep peace. I leaned forward and took two handfuls of lank, black hair, and was just about to twine them about her throat when the eyes snapped back open with such force that I dropped the improvised garrotte and took a step backwards. Those eyes: they were filled with such a muddle of love and desire, and presented such a sad corollary to my own miserable life, that even if the door had not at that moment been thrown open, I would not, I think, have been able to complete the deed.

I shot a glance over my shoulder, dismayed as much as any man, I suppose, who is surprised in his rooms, not only with a beautiful, naked, adolescent slave girl stretched out on his bed, but one whose unfortunate demise provided enough evidence to convict him, if not of murder – the note would absolve him of that – then of such questionable proclivities that years of blameless public life would be compromised forever, and by nothing more than the expression on his face: a look that informed all that beheld it that he had been here before.

She was taken from roach motel to its palatial counterpart on the other side of town. And there she was cruelly displayed in the Square of Heavenly Peace.

They suspended from one of the bamboo stanchions of the scaffold, her wrists bound to the bracket that had formerly supported the executioner's strop. The ridiculous wire feelers still protruded from her forehead, like the sole remaining item of a party costume a sleepy child might cling to during a stormy night.

Soon, a crowd had begun to gather.

Turandot looked out over the square. The sun was low, its rays slanting across the rooftops. And still the slave had not responded to her questions. I stood nearby, the half-dead girl between us, Pu-tin-pao withdrawn to the far side of the platform, idly stroking the stock of his blood-slicked whip. The last thing she had said, an hour or so ago, was that her agony was a gift to me.

The sun disappeared. Night fell.

"You have won, Prince Calaf," she said. "I should have known better than to attempt to wring a confession from one of my slaves. They practice a rather esoteric form of erotic yoga. They are made familiar with the discipline at school. A painful death, for them, is something of an apotheosis." The princess turned to the dying girl and sighed. "Ah, she looks so like me." More so than ever, perhaps, now that Liù so luridly foreshadowed her own fate. And I fell to considering how intimate the princess herself was with "erotic yoga," and whether her practice of

it extended to making proxies of her slaves. "What is it that makes you resist, child?" Her eyes narrowed, as if seeking something that she yet seemed fearful of discovering. "Is it truly the yoga? Or is it –" The cruel lilt of her voice broke, so that she herself became as a child, lost, confused and filled with mysterious presentiment.

Liù raised her head a little. With glazed eyes she looked at me then smiled, saying softly: "Princess – it is love." Turandot walked briskly forward, a hand raised as if to bestow such impertinence with appropriate recompense. Suddenly, she came to a halt. The hand, and its long, red fingernails that had come within an inch of scarifying the ex-chambermaid's flesh, fell to her side. She averted her face and spun about, smoothing down the perpendicular folds of her gown, and then her thick, convoluted locks of hair. "Let her lie thus for an hour or so," she said to the imperial headsman, "that her writhings and moans may satisfy the prurient curiosity of the mob, and then have an armed guard encircle her, so that she may suffer undisturbed by any who, in a fit of misplaced compassion, might be so foolish as to attempt the *coup de grâce*." She turned, and met my worshipping eyes with a long, hard stare. "She would not, after all, appreciate it. Unless, perhaps, it were to be awarded by the dashing Prince Calaf?" I shrugged. "But of course, for good or ill, you belong to me now. And I have a jealous disposition. Let her die, then, without benefit of a man's embrace."

"Then you concede? Irrevocably? Totally?"

"I intend to make a virtue of necessity, Prince Calaf. I belong to you. And you to me. These are the facts. We live with them. We move on."

She offered me her arm. I took it. The executioner went before us and swept aside the curtain that screened the portal set in the palace wall.

"You answered my questions," she said. "How?"

"Because I am the same manner of creature as yourself."

"You are perverse?"

"Not as you are," I said. "I'm human. Fully human. But it is strong in me."

"Perhaps that is why I now concede to you. That, and the vision of this dying slave girl." She looked over her shoulder and once more drank in the sight of tortured beauty. "It is almost as if she *is* me. The me you talked about in the hall. The one who craves, not power, oh no, not power at all, but annihilation."

I placed a hand over her own and urged her forward. "It is time for us to go," I said. She looked ahead, putting the sight, but surely not the memory, of the self-immolated slave behind her.

"Yes," she said. "It is time."

As we walked through the portal I heard several voices in the rapidly swelling crowd begin to hum the first bars of a mournful yet somehow triumphant hymn.

We walked alone. The guards had somehow instinctively understood, or else been previously briefed, that this was how matters were to proceed, come sundown and final defeat.

The palace's long, dark corridors echoed to the crisp tread of my boots, and the brittle, almost panicky report

of stilettos. And if the non-human side of my nature was now, not so much in the ascendant, but on the threshold of establishing its sovereignty and banishing my human part to perpetual exile, then so was the princess's cold, insect-like exterior likewise being undermined by a soft, yielding inner life that longed to be extirpated.

"You seemed so cold. So distant," I said, "when I saw you on the palace battlements, and then again in the Great Hall."

"I cannot surrender myself to myself," she said. "I have always known that. Not if I am to reconstruct the empire of the perverse. I cannot allow myself to be like that girl you call Liù. To lead my people into a new world, I must be cold. Distant. A virgin."

"And what happens now that your deflowering is imminent?"

"I don't know," she said. "Perhaps it was all just a dream. A stupid dream. How could I ever be other than what I am? But then again, perhaps –" She gazed up at me through thick, tacky eyelashes the same way as Liù had done when she had attempted to seduce me. "No; I must be strong. What has happened has happened. I must live with it."

"These are the facts," I said.

"Yes. You understand me, Calaf. And as you acknowledge, you are like me." Her voice betrayed desperation. "The two of us could succeed in resurrecting the perverse where I alone have failed. You might be emperor, not merely of Cathay, but of the world."

"Which reminds me," I said. "We are going to our nuptials apace. Is there to be no ceremony?"

"Tomorrow," she said. "And then your position as the most powerful man in Cathay will not be open to question. But have you won me for power alone, Calaf? Do you not want to enjoy me this evening?"

"I don't covet power. It is you I want. You I have always wanted." I stopped, disengaged my arm from hers and, facing her, touched her glossy, rubicund cheek. "I have known you longer than you suppose, princess," I continued. "Have known you ever since I was a young boy."

She frowned, then tilted her head so that her eyes were occluded by her bangs and their dusky volutes. "I think I've known you perhaps an equally long time. When you spoke to me in the hall... yes, I remembered you from my childhood. Though you're the one I have tried to forget. The one I always knew would track me down. The one I always knew would love me." She raised her head with such a start that her bangs flailed at her eyes, and she had to blink several times, and then brush away a few stray ringlets, before she could focus on me again. "But I don't want to be tracked down," she said. "I want things to go on like before. I had such plans!"

I stroked her cheek, then eased my hand down to her shoulder, where it found the clasp that held the diaphanous shift in place. I unclipped it, and the length of fine, black silk fell to the floor in a souging of pleats and folds. She stood naked, except for high, leather boots and the frigid adornment of her precious stones and metals. She moved towards me, ready to press her body against my own, though whether in true surrender or in

the hope that she could win a reprieve such as the one I had granted her in the hall, I do not know. And not wanting to know until I came to the place where I might risk all, I drew back and, somewhat to her surprise and, I think, consternation, took her arm with cool formality, and led her on through the palace's corridors to our mutually binding fate.

We entered a low-ceilinged region, abandoned, perhaps, for centuries. Tussocks of grass erupted from between the cracks in the floor. Moss grew on the walls, and rich tapestries hung in tatters, victims of the murderous moth. There were few windows, but those we passed revealed that we still overlooked the square, if at an elevation that reduced the gathering crowd to insects.

There were other insects. I began to detect a rank smell in the air. Cockroaches scuttled across the floor, dotted the walls, and, at our passing, would occasionally take to the air in hissing swarms. The constant susurration, the puddles that we occasionally splashed through and, above all, the overpowering smell, suggested that we walked through a sewer. We pressed on, and – as if to bear my impressions out – the cockroach population thickened, and the walls bore evidence of faecal smears and daubs, a kind of cloacal graffiti.

"Unlike the other tribes, roachgirls could not reproduce," I said. "They were aberrations, mutants. Within this generation, you shall die out. What good will your *plans* be then?"

Taunting her, I had hoped she might put off the masquerade of realpolitik and become the creature she had been born to be. But I had merely pricked her into making one last stand, one final defiance.

"We shall die out. Certainly. But not before we have infiltrated the world's slave-caste system. That system will act as our underground network. The Darkling Isle is hardly unique in having had a population of submissives evolve beyond the walls of its cities. Humans who, over time, have become culturally and psychologically addicted to servitude. Such populations exist all over the world. I have trained my girls to insinuate themselves into those spineless, half-cretinized communities and indoctrinate them in the ways of the perverse. We shall reshape that raw, human material so that it reflects our own image, in the same manner our ancestors did with more worthy examples of flesh and bone."

"Really, princess, you have *such* plans. Reshaping! This is ambitious! Particularly since the metamorphic arts of the Ancients are lost."

"We shall not need ancient science. We shall have desire. Need. And it will be so strong that it will reimpose our desires upon others. The flesh will follow the mind. The reborn empire will be fashioned by imagination and will! *Those* are the engines of change, those the engines by which we will recast the body so that it be an expression of the perverse!"

"And this new world of yours?"

"This new world will be a slave world. The beauty and ethos of the slave will be so widely disseminated, and at the same time so desired, that her kind will come to dominate the Earth, culturally, imaginatively and politically.

Slavery will be at the heart of human concerns. As will abjection, the base, and all other stigmata of the Way of the Cockroach. In our pain and humiliation, in the filth and squalor of our low, abject lives, we will be the world's Mistresses. Once again, mankind will have eyes for naught else but *perversity*."

She seemed less eager to convince me than herself. That the slave she was becoming would prove triumphant, not in spite of personal defeat, but because of it.

I felt gooseflesh, and then a fibrillation of muscle as I held her arm tighter, determined, now we were together at last, that we should not be sundered, whether by act of man, god, or a reversion to our other, weaker selves.

At last, we came to her private chambers. It was no surprise, of course, to find them guarded. I was, however, surprised to see Timur. But any recognitive twinge that might have animated my face would, I knew, be so camouflaged by my palpitant state of sexual excitement, that I looked upon him freely, without fear of arousing the suspicion of his underlings.

"Your cloak, please, Prince Calaf," he said in his familiar, inflectionless voice. I took it off and handed it to him. The guards began to pat me down. "He can conceal nothing, I think, in that skin-tight attire of his," Timur remarked, berating his men for their punctiliousness. Then he looked at me. And his eyes became like slits. He resented the fact, perhaps, that he was constrained to acknowledge my impending royal status. "Forgive the impudence of these mere soldiers. But I hope you understand that no weapons can be allowed to enter the princess's bedchamber. And guards will be present outside the door at all times. We cannot take chances."

"I understand," I said. He had underlined what I already knew. In his high-handedness, he had come here to ensure that I did not forget the mission's parameters.

The princess and I passed into the rooms where we were to celebrate our dark rites. The doors closed, leaving Timur and his guards outside. I heard bolts fall into place. I knew, now, that there was to be only one exit. The sole exit which the rare conjunction of desire and my conscience permitted me.

I stood within a slattern's palace of mayhem and grime. The bedchamber was as filthy as the corridors we had recently passed through. Its rich furnishings, its moth-holed tapestries soiled with unspeakable leavings, its broken, useless chandelier and cobwebbed shadows, evoked a luxuriant rotteness, a celebration of aristocratic putrefaction and decay.

I turned from surveying the choice, circumambient squalor and confronted Turandot, allowing myself – now she was so near, so vulnerable to my caresses – a certain leisure in my appraisal of her. My loins sprang to life only when confronted by abject beauty, the loveliness of the low, the lissomeness of the lost, a beauty so extreme it was quite, quite contemptible. I had sung of such creatures all my life and prayed for the coming of another Dark Age, a kind of second Carboniferous, when the roach, clad in lineaments of girlish turpitude, would repopulate the world. What man would not whose own abnormal desires had allocated him the role of exterminator?

Liù. Turandot. Turandot. Liù. Ice had melted, and the memory of a slave's fire had been replaced by a princess's newly awakened sensuality. The contraries of high and low, worth and trumpery, ceased to have any meaning. For the goddess whose presence blessed at the same time as it damned, all these things resolved into one. Just as she was abject, so was she a creature of noble blood; just as she was the perverse noumenon I had so longed for, so was she something more, something unheralded, a creature – the revelation so sudden it almost unmanned me – capable of bestowing an unhoped for grace.

She walked to the big, four-poster bed. Her pelvis rolled in time with her short, measured stride, the perilous heels of her boots silent in the high-piled, filthy carpet. Her long, black mane swung lazily from hip to hip; her jewellery clinked, like a thousand champagne glasses lifted in a toast; and the small of her back dimpled. The boots shone in the pale lantern light. Black. Glacial. No longer imperious but, in emphasizing the helpless voluptuousness of her body, ironic, and purposefully so, as if she had adopted the paraphernalia of a dominatrix to cast the submissive imperatives of her rediscovered flesh into more cunning relief. She turned; faced me; swept her mane over her shoulders to reveal firm, fulsome breasts, their areolae so red they seemed diseased, like cankered florets. Then she sat down on the bed's edge and leaned backwards, her expression quizzical, as if, even then, she had detected that not all was as it seemed.

I came to her, tore aside some of the mosquito netting that hung in ruins from the gilded canopy, and, grasping her by the shoulders, pushed her down into the soiled silks and brocade. She stared up at me, half on, half off the bed, her legs making no attempt to close upon and shield the exposed, pink cleft that wantonly yielded itself up to a reconnaissance. I unlaced my codpiece. And then I gazed down at myself, a captain inspecting an errant trooper. But no; he hadn't gone AWOL. There he was, as always. No Private Thomas, no, not tonight, but a Falstaff, a man who, if something of a wastrel, and, indeed, a rogue, was also a man who, in times of national crisis, could be counted on to prove himself an Englishman through and through.

"Well, aren't *you* a maiden's nightmare," she said, like the vulgar slave she had become. The transformation was complete.

I was, for the moment, forgotten; her gaze was concentrated on my cartilaginous sword, the basest substitute, the lowest, most common denominator, perhaps, there had ever been for my family's lost heirloom, *Espiritu Santo*.

I was filled with a need to confess.

"Do you still wish to know my true name?" I said. Unable to avert her gaze from the mesmeric scrutiny of my nether parts, she seemed as unequally unable to speak. "My name is Richard Pike, tenth of that line," I continued, staring down at the dumbstruck princess, determined to have my day in court even though the sentence I would pass, and that would be passed on me, was a foregone conclusion. "I really am an English Lord, if a dispossessed one. But no prince. A knight, if you will. A member of the Order of Black Knights." Her frown grew

more marked, then, as if she sought to dredge up the significance of what I had said from a long-buried school lesson. "My ancestors were stripped of the family title because it was discovered that they had orc-blood in their veins." I touched my face. The rills and marks, that might, in another place and time, have been interpreted as scars left by acne or pox, had, in the Darkling Isle, signalled that I counted among my ancestors those last living relatives of the perverse, the goblins of the Netherworld. "The Pikes: they were exiled, made to live outside London's walls. They lived so, generation after generation."

She had forsaken the vision of my apocalyptic penis to gaze up into my eyes.

"A black knight," she said quietly.

"Say rather a man reviled. Someone the world could well do without. A man here to exculpate his sins." I put a hand to her cheek. She flinched, then relaxed and turned her head. Screwing her eyes shut with ecstatic concentration, she proceeded to kiss my fingers, one by one. "They used ancient skills on me, you see. Ancient science. It wasn't enough that they had found a man with the right kind of psychopathology. They used artefacts: engines with strange powers that effected a modification of my body."

I bent over and slipped my fingers under her rump, just above where the boots terminated, a few inches from the apex of her thighs. With a violent jerk, I pulled her forward, over sheets so stained that we might have been contending on a discarded mattress in some fetid back alley, rather than the bedchamber of a princess. Then, lifting the lower part of her body into the air, I brought her towards her nemesis. She managed one glance, I think, at the remorseless organ and the trajectory of her own sex, and then flung back her head, and bifurcated her thighs the more. "The Pikes have always had something of an extreme, fantastical and outlandish interest in female flesh." I coughed, in a self-conscious gesture of modesty. "But I fear I am without doubt the most degenerate of my line."

Her scream, the Order had assured me, would be interpreted by the guards outside as a nuptial holler. "I am perverse," I said, through gritted teeth. "Perverse, like you. And people like us no longer belong in this world. We must leave it, and make way for the new humans." And as I fell into a rhythm, I knew that the human was finally gone from me for good, and that, being damned for all time, I was finally free, too.

I stepped backwards. She flopped off the bed, her torso arching away from me, our contact now purely genitalic. Both she and I were aristocrats, but I had always known I would have her as if she were a commoner, exercising my lordly prerogative of *minimalist contact*.

I let my eyes feast on the retroflexion of her torso, the sucked-in belly, the ribcage that strained at the taut, shivery flesh. Her thigh boots rubbed against the top of my leather hose setting up a squeak that leant the illusion that the bedchamber had been overrun by phantom rats. She shook her head, hair sweeping across the carpet and its accumulated filth.

"I'm the exterminator, and you're the roach. The Queen Roach. You are the ice which sets afire, which frees even as it enslaves. You are Turandot! It is my expiation,

princess. They promised me that on completion of this mission, my forfeited lands will be restored and revert to my family. My son will regain the title. The Pikes will again walk with their heads held high. And they can do it. The Order is powerful! My family's shame and dispossession shall be at an end."

I walked her towards the balcony, the princess like a barrow that had lost its front wheel. Her hands were on her breasts, caressing herself as I moved her over the littered ground, her hair trailing through lipsticks, palettes of rouge and mascara, decayed or calcified nuggets of food, chocolate boxes – their contents trodden into the general muck – and the excreta of house lizards, birds and stray humans.

On the balcony, I looked out over the square. A crowd now filled it as on the night of the Prince of Persia's decollation.

"And what is this mission?" I said. "Nothing less than to assassinate the Princess Turandot, and so prevent Reason and Science from being once more suffocated by the influence of the perverse."

I felt the princess twist in my grip. She tensed, tried to sit up, failed, and then threw herself backwards. The abandon she had so long denied herself enveloped her, like a deliciously toxic gas, and she succumbed.

"Guards," she said, weakly, in a pro-forma nod to self-preservation.

"They hear only the cries of passion, the screams of a young woman on heat," I said. "I am here to kill you, Turandot. Do you wish it to be otherwise?"

She wriggled and squirmed, though whether in some last half-hearted effort to free herself or in a frank attempt to take her pleasure of me while she could, it was impossible to establish. "*But your Order of Black Knights has had its day,*" she gasped. "*Oh, don't you know it? You die, too, just like we creatures of the perverse. At last, I see the truth! Both perverse and human must give way to a new order of being. Creatures born of evil and light! It is right that I pass away. I know that now and rejoice! It is right that we both leave this Earth!*" And then there was a catch in her voice that betrayed that ambition, mortality, retribution, had been forgotten, and all that was left was the desire to be lost. "*Oh, my love,*" she said, "*oh my beautiful love! Take me. I am ready to be judged!*"

The moon was high in the sky. I focused upon it as I had the big overhead lamp in the operating theatre before I had gone under the anaesthetic.

The time had come. I let orgasm approach and then overwhelm me. The moon seemed to bleed, as if signalling the end of time. And in the nimbus of its glow, or perhaps, only in the iridescence of my own tear-sodden eyelashes, I saw those creatures that the princess had spoken of. The ones who, in England, we called the Nephilim. The Order averred that it had wiped them from the face of the Earth. But perhaps it was mistaken, or could not bear to admit the truth, even to itself. *Ah, I thought, is this then all for nought; is my house to be reborn only to be destroyed by the angel-demons who it is said will displace us?* With a spasm, a contraction, and a yell that split open the night as if it were a membrane

and I the ravisher of universal darkness itself, my scrotum gave a small leap of delight – delight that was yet tintured with an infinite despair – and the modified seminal plasma, which it was my prerogative to infuse, pulsed up from the little poison sacs that had been inserted in my epididymis, through my urethra and into the daughter of heaven and hell. My goddess, Turandot.

And there, as it made its way through the lesions thoughtfully provided for it in advance, it attained her bloodstream, and set out upon its task of stilling her heart.

Our screams of agony and fulfilment echoed about the great square and directed the gaze of the assembled multitude to the eminence upon which we stood. And in the interlude between our screams, when we would both gasp for life, I thought I could differentiate words amongst the crowd's growing rumble; and I thought that the men, women and children of Cambulac were saying: *"The Princess declares that she knows the stranger's name – it is Love!"*

And I realized then that I did love her, had always loved her, and that she had always loved me.

Her body began to convulse and twitch. The great mane of corkscrew hair whipped across the tessellated floor. *"I see it,"* she gasped. *"It's there. Waiting. Look! So beautiful. So fabulous. Our home..."* Long, self-scarifying fingernails raked at her belly, her breasts, fluttered, one last time, about the root of the invasive length of muscle that transfixed her, and then at last found a home in her locks, which she tore at, frenziedly, until, with one final, massive buck of her hips and a high, pure scream of perfect purity, her limbs relaxed, and I felt the life depart.

The moon's rays were cool upon my sweat-slicked skin. A breeze ruffled my shirt and found its ways into the interstices of my uniform. I looked over the square and then down at my beloved.

The princess had become still. Quite still. Her wet skin shone like wax. Oozingly, she slipped from my grip, a molten, precious statue recommitted to a forge, melted, and then poured onto the floor in an ecstasy of waste.

It was over. My wife and children: let them live. Let them triumph. Let honour be restored. But not to me. For this is all there is for you and me, princess. All that there can be. A moment of glory, and then shame and oblivion.

It was enough.

Like a man who has all his life been leashed to a mad, barking dog, I had finally loosed the knot, upped and run.

The air was shrill with insect-song. Beyond the balcony, in the middle firmament between the streets and the star-flecked sky, a myriad of cockroaches had taken wing, as if come to escort the soul of their departed queen to heaven.

I took the piece of cheap umbilical jewellery from my doublet pocket. I held it up so that its rubineous glass eclipsed the moon and turned it blood-red. I prayed that time would stop, that life might be forever as it was in those too brief seconds when I had consummated my office, and given myself to the one I had followed, served, hated, loved and at last destroyed in the same way that she had given herself to me.

I stood, unmoving, receiving the adulation of my peo-

ple, and waited for the dawn, or whenever else the guards might choose to check upon the princess's welfare. The Order – deaf to my entreaties for the provision of a Liebestod – had, of course, immunized me, lest I die spilling my seed upon the ground. But there would be no escape. I had known that from the first. I had been snared by the world's great muddle of love and desire while still a child. But if I had lived the life of a cheat, rogue and savage, then I would die like an aristocrat. The peace within me was like a celestial hymn. I stood, chin tilted slightly towards the sky, and watched the moon rise higher, higher into the consummate dark.

Like the princess, I was going home.

Richard Calder's eight novels (the latest of which is *Impakto*) have built him a considerable reputation in recent years. The above is the fifth in his ongoing "Lord Soho" series of stories (see *Interzone* issues 154, 159, 161 and 164 for the earlier episodes). Each is set in the same far-future world, but takes place a couple of generations after the preceding tale.

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Hijack Holiday

Ian Watson

Our flight out of London Heathrow has been in the air for two hours, chasing the sunset across the Atlantic bound for Bermuda. Passengers are still occupied with their dinners of venison medallions in Madeira sauce which was preceded by lobster salad. Lowered shelves and food trays impede movement even in first class seats – actually, there are *only* first-class seats in this luxury jet, 140 or so seats, and almost every one occupied. Quite a gathering of multi-millionaires from Europe, the Americas, and Japan, mostly under-40s although some older people are present too. All special people. Actually, although you don't bump into a multi-millionaire every day, there are oodles in the world, but amongst those oodles these ones are particularly special.

Jill and I are sitting towards the front of the plane. A smartly-suited fellow hurries past, followed closely by a young woman in trendy combat clothing shouldering a big bright ethnic woven bag embroidered with tiny mirrors, and then another man in casual designer gear.

A moment later guns emerge from the bag – mini-sub-machine guns of tough black plastic. They're sneaky weapons which an X-ray machine would show as faint and harmless objects, yet slickly they snap into a new and deadly shape.

"Nobody move!" that young woman calls out. Her companions disappear through the galley towards the cockpit, forcing a stewardess ahead of them at gun point.

Naturally, people do move a bit. I certainly look round. A few armed men and another woman are at the rear of the plane, menacing passengers and the other flight attendants.

"We are taking over this flight in the name of Zenji Had! Any passenger leaving a seat without permission will be executed. Otherwise no one will be harmed."

Zenji Had! The apocalyptic cult leader, currently in prison in Israel...

Jill squeezes my hand.
The hijack has started.

"You'll be well treated. Your safety's guaranteed. Special Forces will rescue you – it's good training for them."

"Will weapons all be loaded with blanks?" Jill had asked the man from Unusual Holidays, a smartly dressed dark-haired chap in his early 20s named on his business card as Peter Chough, pronounced chuff. Following our phone call of enquiry, he had come to our mansion in the Warwickshire countryside for a personal, private presentation.

"Hardly! If that was so, the hijack would be a charade. You do want your money's worth. Which is why the android pilots and flight crew know nothing of what will happen."

"Not even an inkling? A suspicion?"

"They're programmed not to suspect, even if you shout out loud, 'Hey, this flight is going to be hijacked – seven of the passengers are armed.' The crew will simply smile and reassure you and carry on."

Androids are pretty essential these days as commercial pilots and air-crew because they can put up with all the stresses and strains of the job better than people. The screaming baby, the air-rage smoker, and especially all the time zones and jet lag. In the case of air traffic control, what with the skies being so crowded, an android is much more reliable at the computer screen.

"Our money's worth," I echoed. "It's quite expensive."

"Well, a hijacking *is*. The plane might end up in need of a complete refit. That," and he grinned with boyish charm, "is why only adventurous millionaires need apply. People who have done everything else."

This pleased Jill. She glowed.

I asked, "Are the hijackers androids too?"

"No, no, they're genuine human beings. Nor are they

actors. They believe in their cause. They will all be under the temporary sway of Persuasion. For them, this will be an unusual experience too."

Persuasion was a, what's the name, nano-drug, nano-virus? It could reprogramme a person's beliefs. The American government denies that Persuasion was developed in its own military laboratories. Whatever the truth of this, the substance was now in use by some unscrupulous regimes in Africa and Asia to defuse opposition and rally support. Officially, Persuasion was banned in the western world. How had Unusual Holidays got hold of any? If asked, Peter Chough would merely tap his nose. I had heard rumours that some cult leaders made use of Persuasion.

"Do you mean to say that the hijackers as well as the passengers are customers of yours?"

The young man tapped his nose. "That would be telling."

"You could package a virtual-reality hijack," I pointed out, "and it would seem to be thoroughly believable."

"You'd still know it was a pretence and you could quit any time. And where would the media headlines be? The media are going to think this is for real. Just imagine all your friends tuning in and scanning the news, and, well, envying you after the event. Good heavens, it *is* real. It's actually happening. So much nowadays is unactual. Virtual safaris, virtual Moon visits."

"Have Unusual Holidays been responsible for any other hijacks?"

The young man touched a finger to his lips. "Aha, not saying. Would *you* tell any of your friends that your ordeal was staged?"

"Not likely," said Jill.

"You say that Special Forces will rescue us. So *where* we finally land after our mystery tour must be fixed in advance, right?"

Again the young man remained inscrutable.

"Surely the end destination has to be pre-arranged. Your company can't have agreements with scores of nations just on the off-chance. That isn't possible."

"Aha." The young man grinned broadly. "Another reason, perhaps, why your holiday is just a bit on the ultra-expensive side. I don't wish to spoil the surprise of making new acquaintanceships during your travails on the flight, but you may well discover that no other lottery winners are on board with you. A suddenly acquired fortune tends to be splashed on more obvious holidays. It takes a discerning lottery winner to seek such an unusual experience."

"We thought so," agreed Jill. "We wanted to be different."

"And so you shall be. When you approached us, did you have *any* idea that a hijack holiday might be on offer?"

None at all. Complete surprise. What if we're spoilsports and tip off a journalist? Before Mr Chough would even show us the Unusual Holidays brochure, he had insisted on us signing a legal confidentiality document which he'd brought along.

He eyed us, knowing that Jill was hooked, and therefore that I was also. "It'll be the experience of a lifetime. Unrepeatable. Unique."

Had there never been any other hijack holiday – and

never would be again? Perhaps there were only enough multi-millionaires with the necessary pizzazz (or who were sufficiently jaded) to sustain one such caper.

After Jill's gaze had lit on the hijack listing she had barely glanced at the other unusual holidays on offer in the brochure – such as a week on a space station, big-shark-hunting in the Pacific, volcano-bungee, or tidal-wave surfing (with wings to deploy and flee free above the devastation as the mountainous wave rampaged ashore). No, being hijacked was *her*. It had frisson, and a sort of vast inverted glamour. Jill always had been keen on sexual bondage.

Already our plane is veering, commencing a wide turn. We'll never see Bermuda, although admittedly we did not expect to.

Trendy Combat Woman calls out, "You will obey all our orders!"

"Oh yes," breathes Jill, letting her raven hair fall forward, half hiding her face.

Maybe TCW notices this.

"You will all sit up straight so that we can see you. Place your hands on your heads *right now!*"

Jill clutches my hand almost painfully, then she obeys, as do I.

Jill's mother was (and still is) a straitlaced person. Given present circumstances, I suppose straitlaced is the wrong term to use. Let's simply say frigid. Jill is far from frigid – however, her upbringing implanted certain inhibitions about enjoying her sexuality to the full. She and I had discovered that bondage released her from these inhibitions because when she's unable to refuse or resist she does not feel personally responsible. *Vincilagnia* is the term for arousal due to bondage. Sounds to me like the name of an Ancient Roman town. Let's visit Vincilagnia, Jill. Oh yes, let's! Such are her cries of ecstasy that we sometimes use a silk gag to muffle those.

In our imaginations we often visit imperial bedrooms and harems and tents of Araby, assisted by a few garments and props – in addition to such useful items as curtain sashes, being softer than ropes, and rope for slow prolonged caressing, and shoulder-length zipper mittens which confine Jill's fingers and pad her wrists for handcuffs, or exhibitionist spreader bars to hold her arms and legs apart and flip her over on the bed – as well as latterly a specially made Chinese Chair which clasps her automatically when she sits down and then unfolds into a bed – not to mention a parachute harness to suspend her from a framework in a room in our new mansion with specially reinforced ceiling. I enjoy the sense of power these situations give me.

Since we became multi-millionaires (although hardly mega-millionaires) thanks to the double-rollover win on the lottery, somehow our domestic amusements had palled just a little. All of a sudden compared with previously we controlled so much wealth that being controlled, or rather feeling controlled, was a bit difficult even though we bought more complicated equipment such as the Chinese Chair and the parachute harness

with ceiling supports. Hijackers would see to Jill being thoroughly controlled. This would be bondage in a novel style prolonged for an unpredictable number of days. Mind you, Jill had teetered over the Abduction to the Harem holiday, but we would not have been able to share that. And I might have been jealous. We were an item, Jill and I. We had never invited others of like tastes to join in.

Would the hijacking give me any sexual thrill on top of adrenaline rushes? I would be participating in Jill's secret excitement which would build and build over a period of days, and after we were rescued and alone in a hotel somewhere, *well...* I foresaw an explosion which I would detonate.

Are some of our fellow passengers similarly motivated? Some are probably masochists. I glance around at women's and men's faces, unable to decide, though not really needing to decide because our own games are personal.

Private, yet now in a sense being acted out in public. Meanwhile I am powerless.

"You," TCW shouts at me, "face the front!"

How long will we need to sit like this? Even with fingers laced and with the support of the back of the seat, my arms are beginning to ache. Smart Suit rejoins TCW, leaving Casual Designer to supervise the flight deck.

"No talking or whispering!" This is addressed to the Japanese couple across the aisle alongside us. Both become expressionless.

"Aw, shit," from the seat in front of us as a pair of hands vanish from view.

Gun in one hand, SS strides forward and his palm descends forcefully. The slap is very audible.

"Hands on head!"

Hands reappear shakily. I can hear the heavy, shocked breathing of the victim of the blow.

"But we're to be well treated," protests his female companion.

"Shut up, rich bitch!" The palm hovers, about to pounce again.

"Don't," the woman begs.

"I told you to shut up!" SS does not hit her, maybe because he would need to lean across her companion. Instead, he orders, "You, stand up and step into the aisle right now."

An easy enough manoeuvre, given first class leg-room.

The woman's blue-dyed hair is gelled into curling ram's horns. She wears an armless, iridescent trouser suit. Quite a few gold bangles adorn tanned bare arms which could benefit by being a bit slimmer. Several jewelled rings are on her fingers. She may have had a face-lift. Just at this moment the android stewardess emerges into the galley – maybe she has been told to supply coffee for the hijackers.

TCW instructs the ram-headed woman, "Remove all your clothes except for your panties if any."

The woman protests. "Why?"

"Because I order it. Do so now! You will still be dressed in your jewellery."

The humiliation. Is this what the woman came on holiday for? Unlikely – Jill and I never described our own kinks to Unusual Holidays to enter on a data base for the use of the hijackers.

When the stewardess attempts to intervene, SS simply turns and shoots her. *Shoots her.* Tiny bullets, maybe carbon-fibre, slam into the stewardess. Blood welling from her blouse, she collapses backwards upon the galley floor, and lies still.

Distinct from the steady throb of the engines I hear gasps and whispering and whimpering.

"Silence!" bellows a man's voice – with a French accent? – from the rear of the plane.

"Now obey me," continues TCW, "or suffer the consequences."

Her victim complies. Soon the woman stands clad only in black lace panties, her tanned thighs somewhat puckered by cellulite, though her breasts have probably been uplifted. When SS uses the discarded black bra to tie the woman's hands in front of her, Jill moans softly.

"Jill," I hiss, "*the stewardess is dead.*"

Jill replies faintly, as if gagged, "*She's android, isn't she? She can be restored.*"

"Can she be?"

Neither of us know enough about the workings of androids to say one way or the other. Artificial persons certainly have some rights. They definitely aren't robots; they're assistants to humanity. And now such a one lies shot and unmoving. Is this a pretence – a piece of theatrical realism?

"Sit down again," SS tells the near-naked woman.

Which she does gladly, though more awkwardly than when emerging from her seat.

As we fly back into deepening night, for in-flight entertainment TCW treats us all to an interminable lecture about the life and surreal political philosophy of Zenji Had, delivered in a chanting sing-song which makes it difficult to follow, yet woe betide if we do not pay attention and fail to answer questions correctly. During the course of an hour and a half most of the passengers lose some or all of their clothes in this ideological version of strip poker. At least we're allowed to take our hands off our heads although trips to the toilet are not permitted until the end of the lecture, by which time some people are squirming.

In our pre-jackpot life Jill and I managed a print-on-demand coffee bar/bookshop with catalogue terminals at each table. We have comprehensive minds so both of us ought to be able to cope well enough with the contents of the lecture, yet Jill muffs her questions – deliberately? – and loses her jacket and blouse. The plane's interior is beginning to resemble an outing by a nudist club. An android flight attendant collects all the discarded clothing to heap at the front.

Zenji Had is not the notorious fellow's real name, of course.

What of his screwball philosophy that justifies such acts of nihilist sabotage as blowing up a dam in India and triggering avalanches in the Alps? The notion that

sweeping human civilization aside will clarify and enlighten and bring survivors closer to Bod-Allah-Gaea, the deity of the Earth, is nuts. *Bodallagaea, Bodallagaea*: a mantra of madness. Our captors chant and compel us likewise to chant for what seems half an hour until our brains, and the plane, are resounding with one nonsense word and we can hardly think clearly any more.

Bodallagaea suggests a painful allergy – a growing hostile reaction of the Earth to the human race, especially I suppose to the rich who consume more resources. Symptoms of the allergy include wild storms and floods and unseasonal blizzards. *Allagaea, Allagaea!* Sounds like a Hallelujah Chorus. *Bod, Bod, Bod, Bod...* sounds like ominous footfalls coming closer, or perhaps a cosmic dripping tap. The fact that our captors are under the influence of Persuasion and are not actually followers of the terror-guru is beginning to elude me.

Once we have partly lost our minds as well as a fair amount of clothing, it's time to start in on our intangible possessions. TCW and SS produce little laptop computers. A couple of the comrades act as bodyguards while SS and TCW make their way along the aisle. Goodness, how much our hijackers know about us! Not merely our names which are on the passenger list, but quite full financial profiles. Share portfolios, accounts, investments, brokers. Some high-level hacking has gone on preceding the hijacking, the entry point presumably being our credit card payments for the trip. Now extra security details are needed, which most people carry in their organizers or in their heads. In defiance of airline safety regulations those laptops uplink to satellites. Liquidation of assets and electronic transfers of millions takes place – to be stored in a safe holding account and credited back to us in due course along with the interest that accumulates. This is rather exciting, like a zany auction, the exhausted bidders punch-drunk by Bod, if not by Bud – we've had nothing more to drink yet. Passengers divest themselves. Reluctance is met with dire threats. Unusual Holidays has thought of everything – these hijackers are now posing as aerial highwaymen, and we are stripped not just of clothes but, temporarily, of our wealth.

So far I have had little opportunity to acquaint myself with any of our fellow passengers. But at long last wee-wee is permitted. As I'm waiting in the queue for the toilet I murmur to the chap ahead of me (burly and hirsute, stripped to his underpants), "How do you rate the holiday so far?"

Without turning his head, he mouths tightly, in an Italian accent, "Too much, too much!"

Too much what? Money paid beforehand? Funds confiscated on board? Too much in-flight activity? Too much piss in his bladder? Or maybe he is expressing amazed praise.

"Silence!" shouts a hijacker.

Afterwards, two androids tour with the drinks cart. The kidnappers have certainly worked out plenty to occupy us. The fallen stewardess still lies where she fell.

Presently – "*Fasten all seat belts tight!*" – our plane is descending... towards what airport?

"*Cover your windows!*"

We aren't even going to see. French Accent patrols the aisle, checking that all windows are masked.

We land, we taxi for quite a while. FA continues his patrol. Finally the plane halts and the engines die.

I do sneak a look while FA is furthest away. Black night and stars, vast blankness apart from a few lights of distant buildings. The temperature falls slowly until we're shivering, Jill worse than I. SS and CD drag the body of the stewardess out of sight but nothing else happens.

An hour passes. Gooseflesh abounds. Teeth are chattering. It's impossible to sleep. Jill hugs herself. We may be in North Africa. It's cold at night in the desert. How stiflingly hot will it become by day?

Blessedly, TCW shouts, "Get dressed!" The android flight attendant who collected our clothing earlier now redistributes everything – but at random. Jill receives a bra too big for her, and a cashmere sweater, for which she's certainly grateful. Some men receive women's clothes, and vice versa.

TCW announces, "The Zenji Had Commando will now release three hostages in exchange for refuelling. Do any passengers suffer from serious medical conditions?"

Wise, wise. Some people who signed up may have thought they were fit enough for such a holiday yet now are having second thoughts, prompted by palpitations.

A score of hands go up – whether legitimately or not, who can say? TCW *glares* at the passengers, and a few hands go down again. Personally I feel tempted, but I would be chickening out of the rest of the holiday, and surely more surprises are in store for us.

Three of the older passengers depart, somewhat shame-faced.

Just before dawn we take off again. Once in the air, we can unshade our windows. We're flying high over brightening desert, southward. Such waves of dunes like a golden ocean. Has to be the Sahara. Apart from the passenger release, whatever exchanges occurred between the ZHC and the ground remain a mystery to us.

Niger? Chad? A baking immensity of barren ground, military vehicles in the distance, tiny black faces. The temperature inside the plane is soaring. Jill plucks feebly at her sweater. This time we haven't been obliged to mask our windows, though we are hardly engaging in much sight-seeing.

"Unless our demands are met," declares TCW, "we will crash this plane into the Great Pyramid. *Allagaea, Allagaea, Bod Bod Bod!*"

Before we can roast aboard our prison, the plane takes off again – indefatigable androids! – and soon we're heading north-westward approximately, presumably towards Egypt – just a stone's throw from Israel, where Zenji Had languishes, or raves, in jail. We're now not merely a hijack but a flying bomb. The hijackers have managed to rack up tension by another notch.

As regards stones being chucked, how much damage would our fairly large plane impacting at 450 miles an hour do to the Great Pyramid? Enough to persuade the Egyptian authorities to beg the Israelis to do a deal? Why should the Israelis care? Dramatic damage to the Great

Pyramid might even boost the flagging Egyptian tourist trade, bedeviled by fundamentalist Moslem militancy!

How can our hijackers compel the pilot or the co-pilot to smash our plane into such a target when the death of all aboard will be the result? Maybe the ZHC have spare ampoules of Persuasion with them. Of course this is all a big pretence.

Despite our apparently lethal new status, I drift off to sleep, quite exhausted.

Jill nudges me. A jet fighter is pacing us. I can see the pilot, helmeted and snouted.

Costs money to scramble a plane.

TCW appears, rubbing sleep from her eyes, so she must have bunked down for a while.

"I have an announcement. Our demands have not yet been met. We shall not target the Great Pyramid."

That's a relief.

"Instead, we shall destroy the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem."

She explains the significance. Third most sacred shrine in the Islamic world. Muhammad travelled to heaven from the outcrop of stone it now shelters. Administered by Moslems courtesy of the Israelis, the Dome also occupies the site of the ancient Jewish temple which many Jewish ultra-orthodox militants aim to rebuild. If Israeli intransigence in the matter of Zenji Had's release causes the dome to be obliterated, riots such as never seen before will erupt in Israel and Palestine and throughout the Islamic world, probably even a war or two. This is much bigger than bashing a bygone Pharaoh's memorial. If Israeli is attacked, Israel may go nuclear. *Bod Bod Bod, Allagaea, Allagaea!*

This is all very exciting, but isn't it becoming rather major? Jill and I had been promised headlines – but *Doomsday* headlines?

We have no proof that any of this is actually happening. That the hijackers have actually threatened Egypt or Israel. We may simply be flying across the empty Sahara, no repercussions in the offing.

What about that war plane pacing us? Hired by Unusual Holidays from some African country glad of the revenue? Rented as a prop (ho, with jet engines, and missiles slung under its wings)...

The androids distribute wrapped breakfasts of cinnamon bagels, cream cheese, lox, smoked trout, rye bread, and mini-bottles of chilled Champagne. We would have received these before landing in Bermuda. First class fare, yet. I feel seriously confused. After our ordeals Champagne goes straight to the head. A couple of passengers are sick in the aisle.

"You eat too richly!" screams TCW.

Coffee follows, to keep us on our toes. Or off them.

Did we cross southern Egypt? Was that the Red Sea below us? Are we heading for Sinai? The previous war plane has been replaced by two fighter jets emblazoned with the Star of David. Sublime theatre! Surely the Israelis are too serious about security to scramble two fighter planes unless they mean business?

The toilets have begun to smell.

If our hijackers truly believe they are who they think they are, what control is there upon what they choose to do? In bondage there's always a safeword guarantee. Utter the agreed word and the captor must immediately free the prisoner. The safeword should be one you wouldn't routinely use. Such as Malaria. Or Nebuchadnezzar. Or Afghanistan. Jill always uses the word Hexagon. As soon as she utters this, the spell confining her – handcuffs, whatever – will promptly be whisked away, hex gone away. (Or when she's gagged, she blinks six times in rapid succession.) Will a safeword be broadcast to our plane at some stage to terminate the holiday? Meanwhile, we are a loose cannon zooming around the sky.

Presently TCW announces, "If we proceed any further Israel will shoot us down. Accordingly, with the welfare of passengers in mind, we will refuel in Cyprus and head for France. France dare not shoot down a civilian jet. There would be outrage. We will crash into the Eiffel Tower!"

We're on a tour of the Wonders of the World – without actually seeing any of them. To demolish the symbol of France: such an action would be very much in keeping with the spirit of Zenji Had.

"This time, we shall not warn of our intentions! We will demand to land at Charles de Gaulle airport to release hostages and negotiate. But instead we will fly into the Eiffel Tower. It is possible that there may be some or even many survivors."

Oh, cue disaster movies, *The Towering Inferno* and such – movies such as are never shown on any passenger flight, yet now they screen in my mind: our plane impaled, blazing or soon to blaze, in the wreckage of Monsieur Eiffel's tower, passengers trying to scramble out on to twisted girders high above the ground. Brilliant. Here's a new turn of the screw of tension.

Are those genuine Israeli jets outside? We're changing course, and they're peeling away.

Cyprus stop-over, as promised. Three more of the older passengers are released. The Cypriots send airline food on board, fare more Spartan than we enjoyed hitherto. I'm beginning to experience cramps. Jill too, and many of the other passengers, I expect. People are stretching their legs and arms, almost as if a co-ordinated exercise session is in progress. Noting this, TCW leads us all in another round of the Bodallagaea chant.

Bondage may require up to 48 hours to produce its full effect upon the willing victim. The person inflicting the bondage needs stamina and diversity so that the game can proceed in an intense and focused way. In my experience, the binder can become more exhausted than the bound, and despite naps our captors are showing signs of tiredness – a stumble here, a yawn there – yet they remain stalwart, fixed in their purpose.

On release, those who were previously bound are often submissive and grateful. This is why, even quite a while afterwards, hostages often identify with their former captors. Fundamentally it's a sexual thing. Despite aches

and the smell from the toilets I feel that this whole plane has become eroticized, and this applies subconsciously even to those who have not previously experienced or inflicted bondage.

Towards evening we take off. I imagine our route westward across the Mediterranean threading its way along the edges of the various national flight control zones so that no one effectively controls us. In our bondage we are strangely free, cut loose from the world and its mundane ties, exalted in our indignity. I am very happy with our very special holiday, and Jill often smiles radiantly to herself.

How many TV sets around the world are tuned to our progress?

Lights are dimmed. Though the scratchy window I can make out the Plough pointing the way northward as we fly up across France, escorted by what must be Mirage jets.

Below, blooms the occasional city or town. Lyon? Vichy? Auxerre?

Two of the hijackers remain in the cockpit. The five others stand at the front, holding their weapons, like a peculiar guard of honour. Soon we will land again – yet will even Paris be our final destination? I feel a sense of limitless destinations.

“We are cleared to land at Orly,” announces TCW. Orly is to the south of Paris. The French do not wish us overfly their capital so as to reach Charles de Gaulle. Even so, Orly is only a few minutes flight time from central Paris. If we overfly Orly no one will shoot us down over the city. The casualties on the ground could run into hundreds.

“Cover your windows!”

We’re descending, unable to see. Perhaps other passengers, to the rear, ignore her order. Being so far to the front, I cannot disobey.

Descending, descending. Engines boosting then throttling back then boosting again.

I hold Jill’s hand tight in mine, imprisoning it.

We’re flying level. This must be the final approach.

“I have an announcement,” shouts TCW. “You believe you are on an unusual holiday. You are not! You think we are deluded to believe we are the Zenji Had Commando. But we *are* the Zenji Had Commando. We know it is impossible to free Zenji Had from Israel. Our demand is a pretence. Our mission is to destroy a national emblem as dramatically as we can at the cost of our lives – which we give gladly. We can never freely walk away from this airplane, therefore we choose death. The world is too full of people! People poison the Earth! But our other mission was to rob you. You have been milked of billions of Dollars and Euros and Pounds and Yen to buy nuclear weapons from ex-Soviet republics. Unusual Holidays only existed for this purpose – a master stroke of Zenji Had-ish inspiration. By now all the money you transferred is the hands of our comrades. That is why we have delayed until now.”

A woman screams, believing what TCW says. Five of those wicked-looking guns are levelled at us captors belted in our seats. We can do nothing but sit.

“Bodallagaea!” cries TCW. “Bodallagaea! Bod, Bod,

Bod. Compose your minds by Bodding! Your bodies will soon be destroyed.”

There’s no proof of this, no proof. Still flying level, the plane picks up speed.

Some fellow at the back must have slid his window-cover up. “It *is* Paris! We’re so *low* – !”

The one thing he won’t be able to see is the otherwise unmistakable Eiffel Tower which will be dead ahead if TCW is telling the truth. Dead ahead is our blind spot.

TCW cannot be telling the truth. This is the latest and finest finesse of our holiday.

Jill begins to chant softly, “Bod Bod Bod.” She is blinking rapidly. Some passengers are panicking and clawing their windows shields up, but many join in the chant. The drumming of Bod mounts ever louder, like some sports crowd cheering on a favourite, like some political rally voicing their approval of a Saddam.

I wonder about the other holidays which were on offer. Supposedly on offer. The volcano bungee-jumping and whatnot.

Oh, this is the holiday of a –

Ian Watson last appeared in *Interzone* with “The Descent” (issue 158), which was just one of many fine stories he has contributed over the years. He worked closely with the late Stanley Kubrick as scriptwriter on his never-made sf film project, *AI*. That movie is now in production from Steven Spielberg, with “screen story” credited to Ian Watson.

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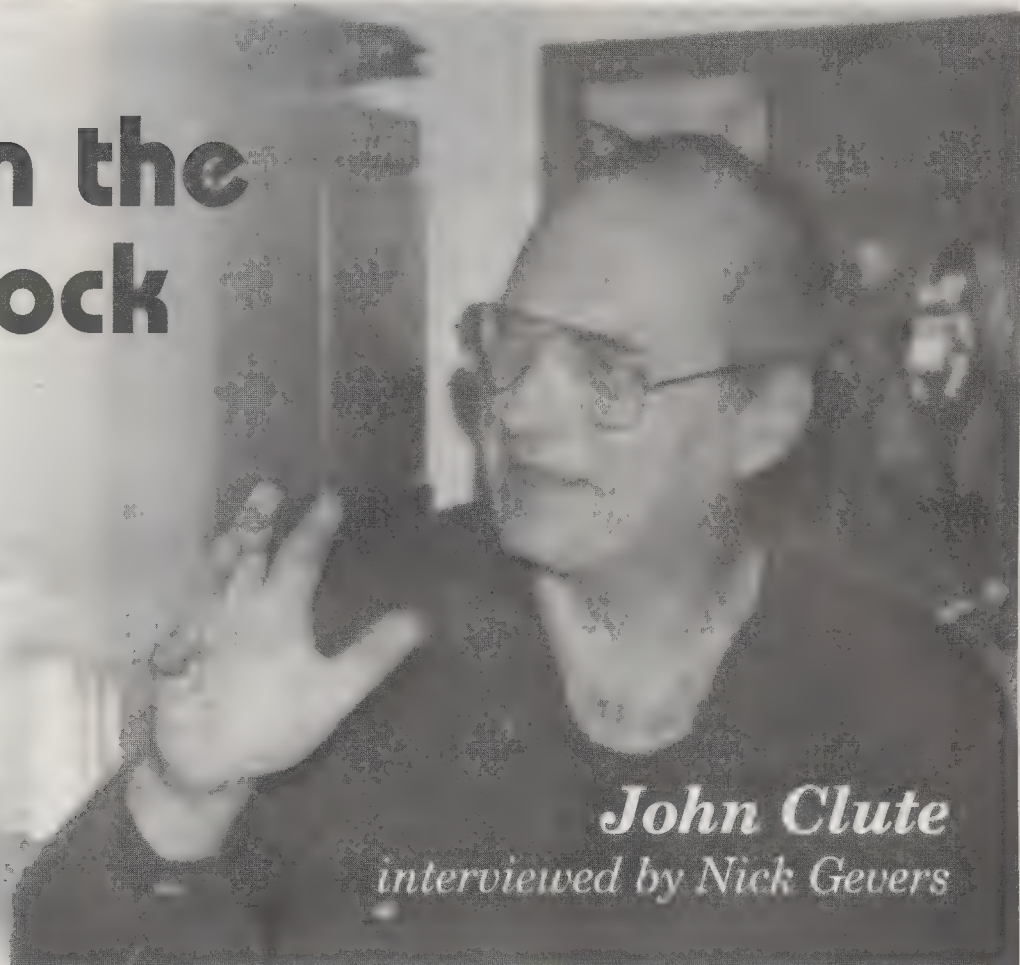
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Stilts in the Heartrock



John Clute

interviewed by Nick Gevers

Photo: Paul Brazier

Born in Canada in 1940 and resident in Britain since 1969, John Clute has been one of the sf field's leading critics and commentators for over three decades. Blessed with a deeply resonant prose style, copious cultural knowledge, and acute literary insight, Clute has penetratingly illuminated (and at times demolished) innumerable works of speculative fiction in his reviews for such publications as *Interzone*, *Foundation*, *The Washington Post Book World* and *SF Weekly*; many of these critiques and essays have been collected in two non-fiction collections, *Strokes* (1988) and *Look at the Evidence* (1996). His invaluable contributions to professional and public understanding of sf and fantasy found summary in the Second Edition of *The Ency-*

clopedia of Science Fiction (1993) and in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), both of which he co-edited and many of whose entries he compiled personally; a briefer, but highly idiosyncratic and lively, reference volume is *Science Fiction: The Illustrated Encyclopedia* (1995), written by Clute alone. *The Book of End Times* (1999) is a meditation on matters of the Millennium.

John Clute's career as an author of fiction has been subordinated to his activities as a critic and encyclopedist; occasional short stories and one novel, *The Disinheriting Party* (1977), constituted his total output in the creative sphere until recently. But a major sf novel, *Appleseed*, appeared from Orbit in April 2001, and two related volumes are forthcoming.

Nick Gevers: For a lot of people, you have, through your reviews (print and online), your encyclopedic work, and your television and other public appearances, become in a sense the face of sf, the genre's public interpreter. What spirit, or philosophy, guides you in this role?

John Clute: There's something pretty surreal about being thought of as "the face of sf." The phrase strikes me, obviously enough, as a very partial truth about me as a guy at a desk, though it's maybe a fair way of describing how the media tend to storyboard their talking heads. I am, of course, one of a dozen "faces" – one of the talking heads who represent sf to the world outside the walls of ghetto, whenever we're asked to. It's all very VR: for a few minutes, doing Talking Head, you have your being inside a frame: a face frame. Within this frame, I'm a face, sure.

But it's very weird. Faces seen through this frame are very precisely artefacts of communication, of a very particular form of communication: uttering as a mask. A mask – as I think I've maybe said too often already here and there – may be defined as half of a communication. Of course, as I make moderately clear in *Appleseed*, this sf novel I'm publishing in April, I do rather think masks are

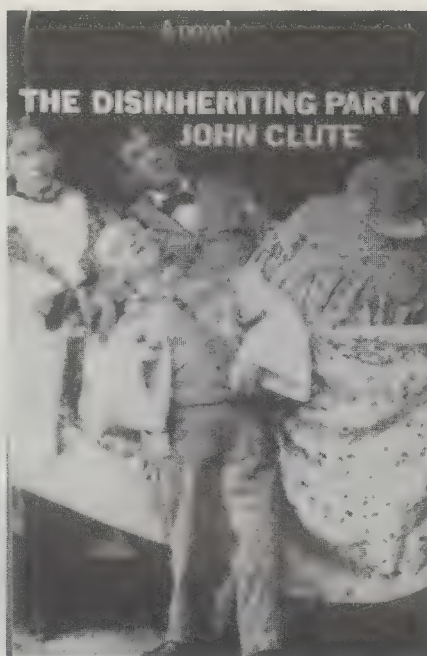
the wave of the future.

Whatever. When I do the face gig and utter to the outside world, I do usually try to implant some wee trickle of awareness that the literatures of the fantastic do model how the world works. That although they are not mimetic literatures, they do address how reality is addressed by us, at this cusp moment for the human species, and for the world we increasingly own. Sf, after all, was the 20th-century literature which was *about* the 20th century. And the 20th century, as an eidolon and Dark Twin, is, after all, the public face of the world we now inhabit.

The Dark-Twin 20th century, which haunts our hindsight and mocks our hideous innovations, is a mask – a mask of history and intent, of grass and tree and chernobyl plague – a mask we recognize every time we look square into the mirror. And the literatures of the fantastic *know* it. Modern sf and serious fantasy treat the planet as a *countenance* to be tweaked. The world that is what we decide it is, the framed face that is the case for the defence, is a world primarily addressable, in our imaginations, through sf and fantasy. Even the crappiest sf novel or story has embedded within it the absolutely terrifying knowledge that what we see – through the augmented eyes we now habitually wear in this 21st century whenever we do the mirror gawk of an old species on the make – is what we have ourselves made. Our gaze upon the world is all that counts, now. The world is what we make it. Heaven help the “beasts.” Heaven help the siblings.

NG: What led you to choose sf and related genres as your area of interest in the first place? After all, sf is held in disapprobation by most academic and establishment critics, and is a challenging field on which to maintain a comprehensive grip, vast and always changing as it is. Or is it those characteristics that have particularly attracted you?

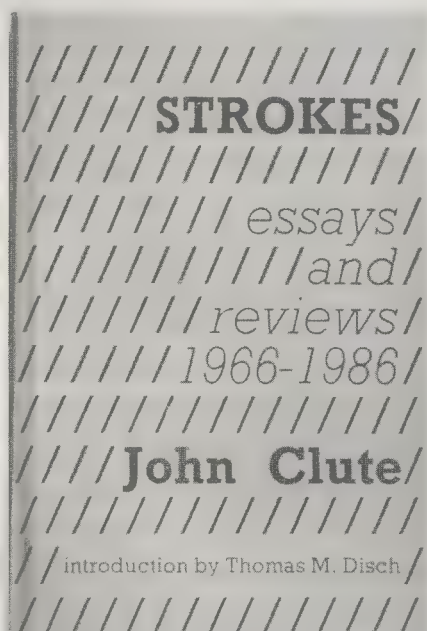
JC: There was never a choice for me, certainly in an academic sense. I never took an advanced degree – I have a perky little 1962 BA in English from New York University, which I keep in the cellar in an oak cask, where it's ageing nicely – and so never had to try to wean myself from the impostures of 20th-century establishment literary academe, in order to be able to express my love of this junk we wallow in, like. And from the first, I had an inflamed sense of injustice, of cultural wrongness, about the way non-mimetic literatures were treated. This goes back a long ways – the first serious sf review I ever did, of Philip



K. Dick's *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* in 1964, incorporated a rant on that precise subject.

So a crusader's conviction that mimesis was a mug's game underpinned, from the first, the sense I had that sf and fantasy embodied something far more interesting than the devotees of that counter-jumping Great Tradition ever guessed. What they embodied, of course, was Story, the story-shaped world.

This conviction has of course embedded itself pretty deeply into the modest amount of fiction I've managed to write over the past 40 years or so. You may have noted, for instance, that the fabric of *Klavier*, the vast space station at the heart of my new novel, is woven from Story.



NG: You're very much involved in the social entity that sf after all is – you know many of the authors personally, you attend conventions and conferences. Yet you've stressed, in your critical doctrine of “excessive candour,” the need to be fully, and sometimes harshly, honest about the books that you analyze. How easy is it to remain “excessively candid” in the close-knit culture of sf?

JC: One of the main reasons for generating that “excessive candour” doctrine was precisely because it *was* hard, in a subculture like sf/fantasy, to tell the truth; but that it was necessary to try to do so, if one did in fact recognize that the genre, and its writers and readers, got a large part of their sustenance from telling themselves (and everybody else) that they were in the business of telling the truth. (This relates closely to what I was saying a minute ago, about sf being the only 20th-century literature that was actually *about* the world.) But it is difficult. The sf/fantasy subculture/affinity group is a bit like a great prolonged performance; and it can seem wilfully hurtful to extract a text (a published novel, say) from this ongoing mutual stroking and poking society, and treat that text as though it were *answerable*. It can seem arrogant, deaf, cruel, unnecessary, sadistic, treacherous, hubristical, perverse, untouchy, feely-not. It is of course none of these things.

NG: Unlike the vast majority of literary critics, you have a distinctive writing style of your own: you use a very large vocabulary, your verbal dexterity is exceptional, you constantly create memorable images descriptive of the texts you discuss. How did you develop this style? Is your stylistic complexity a prerequisite for accurate description of the complex phenomenon of sf?

JC: Insofar as sf (and more obviously fantasy) is a way of telling Story, then it strikes me that the narrow road to the True North of saying anything about the genre is body English. Perhaps I should unpack that a little... By body English, I mean to point to a critical language which metaphorically *enacts* the Story it is attempting to understand. Which is of course what I do: I always try to find the hidden hook, the hidden *turn* which exposes the heart of that which I am reading. And that turn is, almost always, best expressed, for me anyway, through an equivalent turn. In language terms, a turn is a leap, a metaphor, a jump of register, a knight's move that gets you closer to mating. Hence...

All of this is a long way from John

Dryden. If I were to try to place my particular way of using language into an historical frame, I'd tend to think that it was a way of writing which eschewed some of the gains Dryden and his successors made in using English to write prose in; that I was like some minor Elizabethan dabbling his toes in the Ocean of Words that Shakespeare would soon surf. The thing about Elizabethan English is that its users are a lot like Cortez in Keats, in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer": Cortez, and all his men, on gaining their initial visual acquisition of the Pacific, stare "at each other with a wild surmise, / Silent, upon a peak in Darien." And that is also, I think, how we should feel about English right now, in the 21st century. It is a very old language, but it is astonishingly fresh. A good night for nothing.

So I am this minor Elizabethan, bathing in the surf of a tongue which (magically) is no longer old. John the Baptist the Lesser. Who's going to be Shakespeare?

NG: You've been involved very prominently in several large-scale projects: in particular, the huge encyclopedias of sf and fantasy. How did you manage personally to cover so much ground, writing entries on literally hundreds of authors, not to mention many more general topics?

JC: I was awfully lucky with the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* in the early 1990s, when we did the big Second Edition of the thing, because there was already a First Edition. Peter Nicholls, after all, had conceived of an *SFE* as long ago as 1975, and the stuff I did (and the stuff everybody else did) for the 1979 edition served as a model for anything else that might happen. Desultorily at first, and then with some system, I kept a file of alphabetized notes, mostly bibliographical, on sf and fantasy. Eventually I found I was putting into it every bit of relevant data that came my way; so by the time I was writing the 500,000 or so words that was my share of the Second Edition *SFE*, I had at hand an aide memoire for almost every entry.

The *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, which is a First Edition, was harder, of course. But I still had the file, which made it possible for me. I still have the file now. It is daily growing (I think it's over 8 megabytes now in WordPerfect 5.1.)

NG: How would you assess the

current state and future prospects of sf? For two decades at least, the genre's decline has been prophesied, yet fine sf writers still seem to abound...

JC: The long answer to this would take an essay or two, and I imagine you and I have both written a couple. A short answer is this: a central task of sf writers in the year 2001 is to master the engines of 20th-century sf; the task of sf writers is – by understanding how we *did* the last century; by sussing how we characteristically mistook it and, equally characteristically, took it right; by getting some kind of metaphorical grasp of the relationship between a genre which was about the world and the world the genre was about – that task is to use the tools that have been given us. And to make them new. You don't make the world new. You make the tools new. The world, as I already sort of said, *fundamentally comprises* mission statement.

Of course this high-sounding stuff assumes that most of us will – to use a charming 20th-century expression – be able to pass as white in the publishing environment of our brave new world order, while it burns us to the ground. Those of us who escape the fire to come, or who think we escape, do so because the system is imperfect, not because there's a lot of hope left shining through the chinks in the

world machine. I don't really smell grass in our future.

I think a reason I'm likely to continue writing sf is that by doing so it is just possible, in one's imagination, to both tell something of the truth, and to imagine an escape, perhaps through an engine like space opera, from the prison.

Sf will flourish as long as any of us can see an out.

NG: Which sf writers, past and current, would you single out as being of truly lasting literary importance?

JC: I'm not really going to answer that question, because (once again) a proper answer would take an essay. The term "literary" is the ringer here, I guess. A literary sf writer is not a contradiction in terms, of course – as I keep on saying and saying, Gene Wolfe is one of the two or three most important *literary* figures of the past half century, though he is absolutely not that important as an sf writer pure and simple – but to unpack just how genre sf and the protocols of "literature" interact is something beyond me just now. I mean, E. E. Smith is a figure of incomparable importance within genre sf, isn't he? His importance to the understanding of how the engines of sf evolved is greater than Gene Wolfe's, isn't it?

And take Philip K. Dick. I find his work of immense literary merit – but tell that to the logorrhoeic Mr Updike.

NG: Prior to *Appleseed*, you published one (non-sf) novel, *The Disinheriting Party* (1977). So you have long-standing experience as a novelist; why have you written fiction so sparingly since?

JC: *The Disinheriting Party* took a long time to write, went through three significantly different states, each shorter and more complicatedly intense than the previous, until a 150,000 word manuscript was finally reduced to the 55,000 words that were eventually published. There was something crazy about this – it would have been much better if I'd just written three novels, kept two in my drawers, pulled them out later with a big pop, polished them, released three novels in two years, wow-wow, sensation, what a guy, but I didn't.

The other reason is that, unlike a lot of novelists, I didn't have an unexpurgable need to *talk it out*. With any but the most soul-lost professional word-spinner, I seem always to hear, within the words of their big brave story facing



down the world outside, a constant transmutation into scrimshaw-you-can-read of the coils of hurt. This is a cliché, but it would be cowardly to dodge shy on that account. And of course the other side of it all is joy.

Each new work of fiction is something which has been changed. The writer who keeps on writing is a fount of change. But beware the fount.

I never had the *cacoethes scribendi*, I think it's called. Maybe it'll come to me now, now that I'm old enough to risk outing.

NG: Looking now at your new novel, *Appleseed*: would it be accurate to say that this book, in its hyperbolic symbol-encrusted ambition, functions as a sort of summation of the entire sub-genre of space opera?

JC: More an aria than a summation, I think. As a space opera writer in 2001, I'm just one singer in a throng of divas. There are lots of sf writers right now who've written or who are beginning to find the basic engine of space opera very useful indeed, because it is an engine you can tell things with. In the UK, one could mention a wide range of authors, whose approach to space opera varies a lot, but who share a love of the opera and who want to say stuff. They'd include Brian Aldiss (though *Helliconia* is a while ago now), Iain ("M") Banks, Stephen Baxter, Colin Greenland, M. John Harrison (he's writing one now), Paul J. McAuley, Ken MacLeod, Peter F. Hamilton, Alastair Reynolds. Mary Gentle went off space opera (or at least the planetary romance form of it, which *Helliconia* also honours, I guess) a long while ago, but *Ash* has much of the feel of space opera.

Which is not to say that *Appleseed* is exactly straightforward. The density of quoted material is pretty considerable. I enumerate my debts only partially in the Acknowledgements; there are lots of quotes in the book that lie too deep for tears; I couldn't bring everything up to consciousness in time to thank all the fathers and

the mothers. I can adduce at least two reasons for that density of quoted material, of parodied material, of material subject to intense transform, etc, etc.

1) It is a language thing. It is what a minor Elizabethan might do: treat words and tropes as equally fishable, equally and variously an undertow of every utterance.

2) I think in a review I wrote a while ago I suggested an image for sf in its old age: that we were like the characters at the end of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, walking through the congested air of our lives on the stilts of our memories, the stilts that, like a core into heartrock, *sample* our previous lives. I think that is what sf is for me: stilts that bed in heartrock.

This ties in directly to what I said a little while ago: that sf is an engine of Story. In order to tell that Story new in 2001 – after all that has gone before, after everything we have already done to explain the world and take joy in the world and advocate our vision of the world so that it will come true – I do think it's a good idea to accept the inevitable, and allow the past to talk through us. As though we were what the past dreams. But we are dreamers on the cusp of a planet that we have become the death of. As I said in *The Book of End Times* (not a very good book, I'm afraid), "We are burning the midnight oil of the world." Cusp dreamers awake!

NG: In *Appleseed*, you tackle the matter of entropy head on, calling it "plaque." Is the book basically an ecological novel, assailing our destruction of our natural environment and extermination of our sibling species? Or are you also targeting capitalism, with the exploitative and callous Insort Geront as its primary representative?

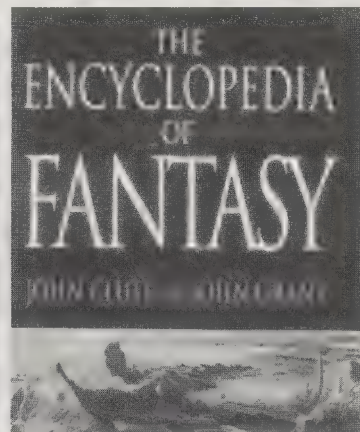
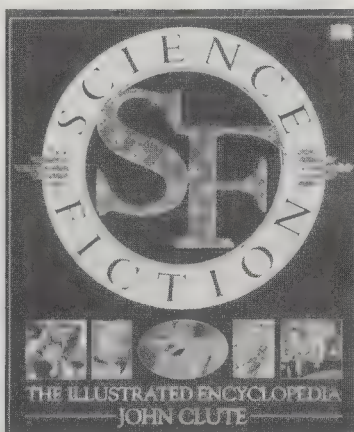
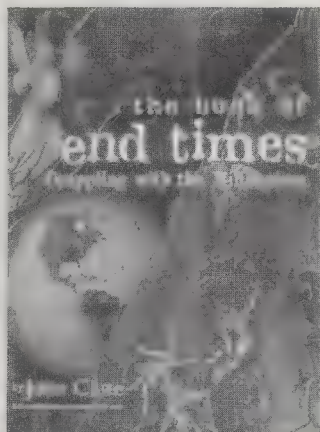
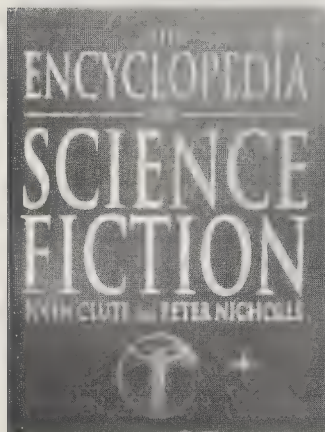
JC: Yeah, in a way. Though that is not to claim that I know what entropy is. What I *do* suspect is that, in this life and on this planet, we humans are the "plaque." We are the creature whose hunger for life is the negentropy that

is costing us the earth. In *Appleseed*, of course, the hunger is God's.

There is no sustained assault on late heat-death capitalism in the novel, though there is nothing in the book, I think, inconsistent with what one would say if one were to attempt to mount a sustained assault on those who golf while the world burns outside Super-Cannes. Just in this week's newspapers, we are able to read about legal actions taken by the Insort Geronts of 2001 in order to keep nine-tenths of the world from gaining access to the anti-HIV drugs that generate such huge profits in developed countries. Thus making it impossible for the populations those drugs were tested on in the first place to get any access to them when they proved safe enough for *us* to use. I wouldn't go so far as to suggest that the global corps of the world use their contemptuously effortless control over the abject national states of the world in order to launch a series of initiatives in population control; but it is certainly tempting to create a space-opera universe in which that sort of thing could clearly happen.

NG: I was very intrigued to realize that *Appleseed* is quite centrally a religious novel, or rather, with the "His Dark Materials" trilogy by Philip Pullman as a contemporary parallel, an anti-religious novel. Is your view of God – God the predatory Eater of Worlds – truly a balanced one, would you say?

JC: It was a bit shocking to read "His Dark Materials" last autumn, none of which I'd looked at till then, at which point I read the whole trilogy as one book in order to review it for *Interzone*. I don't know if there were any phrases in common; but the anger against the dire organized religions of this planet, which treat the world as a kind of oil platform to suck grace from, is beautifully articulated throughout the trilogy. (My own animus is much less comprehensively indited.) Professionals in the field will know that my own novel (I finished it



in March 2000) would have been at the publishers for months prior to the release of *The Amber Spyglass*, where Pullman's gaze against God is fully articulated; but it's an odd feeling all the same. I called my *Interzone* piece "The Gaze Against God" as a mark of the utmost respect for what he accomplished. (I always detested Christianity as C. S. Lewis presented it, and I think Pullman consciously targeted the leprous Despite against the world, our world, the only world that is, that Despite which so disfigures Narnia.)

Of course my view of God as the Eater is unbalanced. But *Appleseed* is a fiction, a fiction in which there is a God. I'm an atheist. Any view of the universe in which God exists is unbalanced.

NG: Stylistically, *Appleseed* has a lot in common with your critical writings: it's image-intense, densely allusive (as you've already stressed.) Could one fairly see this novel as a prose poem?

JC: I think maybe not. Though this may be a prejudice against the kind of fictions usually called prose poems. What I tried to do was construct (or follow the Ariadne's thread) of a story that would be able to bear the burden of a style conscious of its stilts, a way of uttering language that tends to move from image to image rather than from thought to thought. I tried to make my story illuminate the darkest corners of the words I used. Plot was the figure; language was the ground. In the end, the figure ruled. In what I understand "prose poem" to mean, it's the other way round.

Another way of putting it. In the nonfiction prose I write, the book being reviewed is the Ariadne's thread, the engendering incipit, the quarry hunted. In *Appleseed*, space opera itself is the Ariadne's thread.

NG: For all the seriousness of its concerns, *Appleseed* is a very amusing book, and offers a cosmic vision of great harmony, something also associated with Comedy in its classic forms. Your text makes copious references to the tradition of the Commedia dell'Arte as well. Is *Appleseed* a Comedy?

JC: Without going into this sort of thing in vast detail, I might just say that I think that Story itself is inherently comedic. A more straightforward answer to your actual question would be: Yes. Yes, I do think of *Appleseed* as a comedy. The Commedia dell'Arte references infiltrate

the book for a couple of reasons.

1) Because of the masks, masks being important throughout, for it is only through a mask inserted into the world of time that an AI can communicate with us flesh sapient mortal creatures.

2) Because the ur-source of the Commedia dell'Arte cast lies quite probably in rites using totemic animal masks, and intimations of a blessed animality shape *Appleseed* throughout. And

3) because the Commedia repeats every night. It always begins again. A space opera set 3000 years in the future, in which every character walks on the stilts of his or her cultural heritage, is a good place to remember that Comedy is the form in which Return is possible.

NG: One of the primary comic effects in *Appleseed* is the sense of homo sapiens as a thoroughly malodorous sex-obsessed species, a species alarming in this respect and others to alien species. Why your emphasis on humanity's "pong"?

JC: Well, I'm not actually an alien from another sphere, and I don't know that we really and truly pong, or that we would affect other species as malodorous, that we would make some species faint en masse if we met them face to face. Nor do I know that other

species in the universe are less ecstatically and obsessively tied than we are into the sex/reproduction knot that, in the novel, is described as being one of the immediate causes of the pong. But it's a twofold thing. It's true that homo sapiens, in the novel, are unique in that their every action is ultimately, on analysis, about fucking. It's also the case, in the novel, that there is something touchingly brave about our incessant urgent need to touch and get inside the flesh of our fellow sapient, because we are a deaf species. We cannot hear one another truly, we do not live in consanguinity with our siblings. Sex is a semaphore across vacuum. We are exiled from Eden. The underlying pathos of humans, in the novel, is that our constant fucking is an attempt to regain Eden. Fucking is as close to Eden as we'll ever get, and it is chivalrous of us, in the novel, to keep trying, to keep the semaphore erect. But we are very noisy. We do not know how to modulate our pong. We make a great raucous sound in the universe. We drown out the commands of God, Who finds that our presence confounds His eating schedule. Other races in the universe – in this novel – may through their consanguinity be terribly vulnerable to the false solace of the Eating God, Who lures them into His Teeth for munchies; but humans are inedible.

They have to be killed in other ways. They have to be tricked into killing themselves. In the next novel, which is set a couple of thousand years earlier than *Appleseed*, I hope to show how God tricked us into killing dead our Human Earth.

NG: Two varieties of cultural artefact – the Portuguese azulejaria, and the English mappemonde – feature prominently in *Appleseed*. Why did you choose these symbolic systems as your metaphoric props?

JC: The mappemonde has always been with me, and when I discovered that some mappemondes were shaped like apples, that there were whole worlds in the face of an apple, then I was properly hooked. My worlds – Klavier and Eolhxir, which one may pronounce elixir – are, after all, live entities as well as planets. If Gaia has a face, that face would best be understood as the face of the Apple.

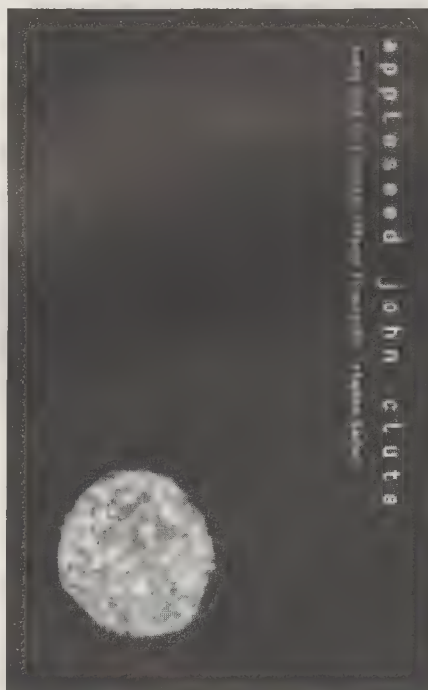
Azulejaria, on the other hand, I discovered in Portugal in late 1999 at Simetria, a deeply congenial sf conference held in Cascais, near Lisbon. The Commedia dell'Arte material was already more or less in place; as were the



complicated manifestations of the Made Minds through flying masks. Azulejaria – a Portuguese term for figurative panels put together with tiles – seemed perfect, because some of the images depicted on these tile panels were out of the Commedia. So the walls of my protagonist's ship, which is called *Tile Dance*, are built of azulejarias depicting scenes in which (if I'd had a mind to absolutely imitate Gene Wolfe and put this explicitly into the text) much of what happens in *Appleseed* is already told. (After all, we walk on stilts, bedded into the heartrock.) There is nothing in the book which contradicts an understanding that the walls of *Tile Dance* may be intricate with Story. Maybe the third novel will come clear on this...

NG: Finally: your upcoming projects. You've mentioned further novels, related to *Appleseed*; is a further essay collection in prospect also?

JC: I have an essay collection, to be entitled *The Darkening Garden*, which apparently Liverpool University Press is going to publish. I say "apparently," because, although I have had extremely friendly words with LUP, I



don't actually have a formal agreement yet. Everything for the book is written, and already published elsewhere, with a couple of exceptions. It's mostly long reviews and some essays.

There is one piece not yet written: I want to construct an argument that the last two centuries – a period during which the pressure of world-historical change has been unprecedentedly unrelenting and ultimately horrific – was precisely the period during which the genres of the fantastic (in particular) *should* have come into existence. Which of course they did, because the genres of the fantastic comprise, in this view, a series of strategies to control anxiety. They are ways of dealing, or of fruitfully refusing to deal (as in great fantasy), with a world which has become a funhouse haunted by Dark Twins themselves anxious to supplant us. And it's all still to play for. The genres of the past two centuries might well climax in an epithalamium for the chemical wedding of Jekyll and Hyde, as I plan to put it, sort of thing.

At the moment, I'm working on *Earth Bound*, the novel I mentioned a moment ago. The final novel in the sequence (or trilogy, or extended single tale, or triad of singletons that talk to one another) is to be called *The Garden of Uttered Names* (note the use of "garden" again). It will carry the War Against God to its successful conclusion. The title means Eden. **[Z]**

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In the Shadow of Her Wings

Ashok Banker

Dravid expected Kali border security to be much tighter than it was. All he got was a body search that was routinely thorough, and a few old-fashioned tests and checks. It reminded him of a visit he had made as a young right-wing Hindu activist to an Indian nuclear-weapon testing facility back in 1998, after the Pokhran atomic tests. His briefings had been correct in this respect: Kali did not seem to have much use for 21st-century safe-care.

The Border guards finished with him in a few minutes then led him down into the basement of the Border Post and on through a concrete corridor that was at least a kilometre long in his estimation. Although there were far too many turns to be certain: it could be twice as long, or half. He was surprised at the absence of defences. After all the build-up, it was an anti-climactic letdown. Could the disputed area truly be this easy to infiltrate? A single platoon of Black Cat commandos armed with nominal safe-care weaponry could take this border post and entrance in a few minutes, he estimated. The dozen-odd border guards he had seen above ground had borne no visible weapons. Ridiculously easy.

Then he remembered the first and longest of his briefings.

Shalinitai, the renegade Kaliite-turned-consultant to the Disputed Territories Task Force (DTTF) had commented on this very fact during her lecture on Kali's political history: "Do not be fooled by Kali's apparent lack of defences. Like the Goddess after whom it is named, the disputed region that aspires to nation status under the name of Kali is armed with something far more dangerous than physical weaponry. She is armed with the

power of the spirit. The power of faith."

Dravid had resisted the urge to yawn. He had heard this kind of "empty-hand, spirit-power" mania too many times to even give it credence by mocking it. He had also seen any number of similarly deluded cults and spiritual blindfaithers walk like fools into the trajectory of safe-care weapons, only to have their very real physical bodies torn to shreds by unspiritual projectiles and explosives that needed no faith in invisible deities to perform their lethal function. Faith might move mountains; but lasers cut flesh. And without flesh to sustain it, there was nothing left to harbour faith.

Sensing his bored scepticism, the renegade had paused and sighed softly. Almost resigned to his indifference, she had added, "Kali exists only because the people support its existence and because India is still a democracy. That is a far more formidable defence than any safe-care arsenal." This he found more acceptable. It was a political argument, one of the classic cornerstones of every nationwide cult that was allowed to fester in the armpit of a republic under the guise of freedom of faith and right to political dissension.

There had been an adversarial gleam in her dark eyes as if challenging him to challenge this statement. But Dravid was too much of a cynic to waste time on political arguments either. As far as he was concerned, they could dispense with the briefings and motivational lectures. He didn't need the comfort of political conviction to help him do his job. Assassination was murder no matter what the justification. The only motivation he needed was the paycheque.

As if sensing this from his lack of risibility, Shalinitai had paused in her briefing. Deviating unexpectedly from her subject, she had poured herself a glass of plain water and said, "You will find no resistance when you go to assassinate Durga Maa. It will be the easiest assassination you have ever committed."

Dravid had waited for the punchline he knew was coming. Moral lectures always had a punchline.

"It's living with the knowledge of your act that will make the rest of your life unbearable," she said. He hadn't smiled. He hadn't needed to. She knew the smile was there, behind his inscrutable face. He read the awareness in her eyes and sought the inevitable frustration she must feel after having made her strongest argument and failed. There was none. Only a faint glimmer of sympathy.

"I pity your task, assassin," she had said.

He hadn't smiled at that either. He had been pitied before too. It was one of the most predictable responses, apart from self-righteous rage.

The corridor curved one final time and ended abruptly in the entrance to a very narrow stairwell. Dravid drew his large frame in to accommodate the inconveniently low ceilings and close walls. As they climbed, their footfalls echoed jarringly in the confined space. The short lithe, smaller-built female guards moved easily upwards, setting a hard pace for him to match. He had visited enough ancient Indian fortresses to understand the principle: Invaders would be forced to attack in single file, crouched awkwardly low. A single guard could defend the stairwell, and the piled bodies of the wounded and dead would make progress even more tortuous. It was a virtually impregnable defence – a thousand years ago. He glimpsed tiny slits in the wall and ceilings, and recalled similar apertures all along the corridor. He had taken them for air vents at first but now understood that they were in fact guard posts. The corridor was lit from above, illuminating him and the guards as they climbed endlessly, but effectively concealing the watching guards stationed behind the walls.

Dravid wasn't impressed. Medieval subterfuge and manual defences were no match for modern safe-care. A single safe-care biogas capsule, delivered by any number of methods into the corridor, could wipe out the entire garrison of unseen defenders. The self-consuming biogases would take barely three seconds to render the air safe again and that would be the end of Kali's stupidly outdated defence system.

He had climbed more than a thousand steps and was suffering from the bent posture and elbow-and-shoulder-bruising closeness of the concrete walls when the stairwell finally widened and rose high enough for him to straighten up.

The alcove resembled a small circular chamber in a stone tower, again of obviously medieval design. It was ironic in a way, he thought as the guards led him through a series of corridors and transitional chambers. Whatever little he had seen of Kali so far was clearly modelled on the architecture of medieval India. Yet Kali itself went to great pains to insist it was not part of India. Not

according to the 700,000-odd renegades who had taken refuge in this tiny pocket of disputed territory, defying Indian national laws and international sanctions to declare its independence as a sovereign nation in its own right. To these cultist fanatics, this little area of Central India bordering the legitimate Indian states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa was the nation of Kali, a concept as fiercely independent as the concept of Israel had become after the Nazi pogroms of World War II, almost three-quarters of a century earlier. The world's only all-woman nation. To the Indian Government, though, this was simply Disputed Territory, just as areas of Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir had once been designated before the Re-Merger with Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal ten years ago. United India could not afford to sanction a Kali, let alone acknowledge its legitimacy.

That was why he was here now. To end the problem by rooting out the source. Destroy the brood-mother and the species dies out.

The guards fell back, surprising him. He could not conceive of a reason why he should be allowed to proceed unescorted. Yet when he turned to look at them questioningly, the one who had led the detail, a short, dark-skinned muscular woman with scar tissue obscuring her left cheek and neck, pointed unmistakably down the corridor. He was to proceed alone. Dravid shrugged, amused at yet another ludicrously amateurish security lapse, and walked on. He had gone several hundred paces before he realized what was odd about this particular corridor. His footfalls made no echoes.

The reason for this became clear when he reached the end of the corridor, another circular chamber. A slit in the wall revealed not the darkness of the subterranean passage or the diffused top-lighting. Instead it exposed a slice of brilliant blue sky. He was undoubtedly in a tower. He realized with a start that this was the very same edifice that he had seen on various sat-images during his briefings. One of several hundred such towers positioned at regular intervals along the border of the besieged territory, ringing the entire disputed territory like giant stone sentinels. They were believed to be guardian outposts constructed to watch over the Line of Control that demarcated Kali's disputed land space from the surrounding Indian territory.

"Envoy Dravid," said the woman who was waiting in the sunlit tower chamber. "Please be seated." She indicated a thin woven mat on the ground, identical to the one on which she was seated cross-legged in the yogic lotus posture. Dravid scanned the room and surrounding area and couldn't believe his luck. No guards, no weapons, no defences. In short, no Safe Care at all. Dravid was unable to believe that his mission could be this easy to accomplish. He looked at the woman who was watching him calmly.

"I am Durga Maa," she said. "The one you seek to assassinate. Tell me, Envoy, would you like to kill me at once, or would you like to maintain the pretence of a diplomatic debate for a while?"

Dravid blinked rapidly.

She smiled. "I suggest that we get the assassination over with first. That way, your mind will be free to discuss the larger issues at stake here, without distraction."

And she opened her arms in the universal Hindu gesture of greeting. "Sva-swagatam, Mrityudaata." Welcome, Angel of Death.

Even if it was a trap, as every meg of data in his mental archives said it must be, Dravid could not let the opportunity pass. His not to question why. His but to kill and fly.

He hesitated only long enough to run one final scan-check. The result was the same as the previous three times. It was an ID-OK, confirmed through half a dozen cross-checks including a perfect DNA match. This woman seated before him was Durga Maa, the founder and leader of Kali. She was his target.

He used his thumbnail to circumscribe a tiny crescent-shaped incision in his left wrist and withdrew the reinforced silicon needle from his forearm. It was barely ten millimetres in diameter and he had to grip firmly. He drew it across his palm, wiping it clean of the tiny flecks of blood and gristle that coated it. Tinted to resemble a prominent vein, it was a translucent green that caught the sunlight as he moved across the chamber. He was at full alert now, his keenly-honed senses prepared for any resistance or ambush. There was none.

She smiled as he inserted the lethal tip of the needle between her ribs. Her breast was yielding and warm against his hand. He pressed hard, brutally, and the entire nine-inch length entered her chest, sliding easily. He pictured it puncturing her left lower chamber, spilling precious life-fluid. In her eyes, he watched the look of serenity flicker and fade.

"Kali be with you," she said.

And then she was gone, her body slumped sideways, legs still locked in the yogic position. He kicked at her thighs, releasing their grip, and she sprawled out more naturally. Darkness pooled beneath her body.

He stood and looked around, unable to believe it had been this easy. He felt a qualm of unease. Her attitude, the knowledge that he was to assassinate her, her serene acceptance of her death, these were not things he was equipped to deal with. Even with the most fanatical of cult leaders, there was always the final struggle for survival, the organism's instinct for self-preservation. But she had been truly ready.

He pushed these thoughts from his head. The most difficult part still lay ahead. Escape. He had analyzed the possible options and they were all negative-rated. The least likely to fail (12.67%) was by blasting a hole in the wall of this tower and speed-climbing down the outside. But that was assuming the guards were armed and prepared for violent retaliation, which they didn't seem to be.

A circular stairway ran around the perimeter of the chamber. Dravid went down the stone stairs quickly and silently, alert for the first sign of armed response.

He descended to the next level, and found himself in an almost identical chamber. It was as sparsely furnished, with the same chick mats on the floor. And a woman.

He stopped short at the sight of the woman. She was younger than Durga Maa, but premature greyness made her seem older at first glance. She was dressed similarly but not precisely the same way. He found no match for her in his records. She was also very beautiful.

She looked up as if she had been expecting him and indicated a bowl of steaming tea and two earthen cups.

"Greetings, Envoy Dravid. With the demise of our beloved sister, I am now Durga Maa. Would you like to kill me at once, or will you partake of some refreshment first?"

And she opened her arms in that same gesture of acceptance.

Dravid thought it was a ploy at first. A delaying tactic intended to stall him until the guards arrived. But his internal systems showed nobody else approaching within a hundred-metre radius. No safe-care weaponry in the chamber. Nothing capable of doing him any physical harm.

His system announced an ID match for the woman seated before him. With a rising sense of unease, Dravid checked and rechecked the scan results until he could no longer doubt them. Somehow, in the space of a few seconds, she had changed her DNA structure internally, although her physical appearance remained the same. To all intents and purposes, she had become exactly what she claimed she was: Durga Maa, leader of Kali, down to the smallest twisted strand of genetic composition.

She poured tea for him. "You cannot comprehend how two women could possess the same identity. It is a scientific impossibility, you think."

She held the clay cup out to him. He made no move to take it. He was still running checks and rechecks to examine every variant possible, tapping into the orbital systems to access greater processing power and other archives.

She set the cup down before the mat intended for him.

"You are right," she said. "Science cannot explain it. But faith can. There is only one Durga Maa – at a given point in time. But on her demise, her entire personality and being, what we like to call her *aatma*, passes to a successor. That is I."

"*Aatma*," he repeated scornfully. "You mean, soul?"

She poured tea for herself. Her movements were delicate, assured, and very pleasing to watch. She had a fine bone-structure that would have been considered beautiful among North Indians, but far too Aryan and brahminical to South Indian eyes.

"It does exist," she said. "No matter that science cannot prove it does. I now possess Durga Maa's soul, which makes me Durga Maa."

She gestured at herself. "This physical shell is immaterial. It is the person within that matters. I am the avatar of Kali, just as Durga Maa herself was while she lived."

Dravid chuckled softly. "Avatars and *aatma*. What is this? A TriNet Fiction? Save the spiritual rant for blind-faithers."

She held the bowl up in both hands, Asian style. "You are sceptical," she said, sipping tea. "It is to be expected. But I can establish this as a scientific fact which your technology can verify beyond doubt."

She set the tea down on the floor and spread her arms in the same universal gesture of acceptance.

"Assassinate me too. And see for yourself."

He hesitated for barely a fraction of a second. Then decided he had nothing to lose. This time, he used the instrument at hand, smashing the tea cup and drawing the jagged clay edge across her jugular, severing it on the first try. He watched her bleed to death, spraying her life across the stone floor. The beam of sunlight shining through the jetting arc turned vermilion briefly.

Because he was curious and because it was the easiest option, he proceeded to the next lower level.

There was another woman waiting in another chamber. This one was much older, with the wizened semi-oriental features of a North-Eastern Indian. A Mizo or a Naga. Descendant of the head-hunting tribes of the Indo-Burmese hills that had been converted to Christianity by relentless American Baptist missionaries a few generations ago. She did not speak as much the earlier one. But his scans showed once again that impossible change in DNA even while her physical appearance remained the same.

He killed her with vicious efficiency, snapping her neck with a fierce twist of his powerful arms. This time, he observed the change after death closely. His scans showed a change to another DNA structure. Not a change, he realized. A reversion to the woman's original identity before she became the avatar of the Goddess.

A rage swept through him, replacing the initial sense of bewilderment. This could not be happening. It was not part of the plan. It was a scientific impossibility.

He took the stairs with athletic speed, reaching the next level an instant before the change occurred, and through the "eyes" of his system he watched the conversion in progress, the very molecular structure of the ribonucleic strands altering. Then he killed the fourth avatar – for want of a better term – before she could even speak. She had a mole on her left eyebrow and the darkened skin and sallow features of a Malayalee. There was coconut oil on her hair and it smeared on his fingers as he held her skull and smashed it against the stone wall repeatedly.

This went on for several more levels. Chasing the "aatma" as it flew from woman to woman. Assassinating each new avatar of Durga Maa as she was genetically rebirthed.

By the 23rd level, he found himself tiring. His clothes and body were soiled with blood and gristle as well as traces of each woman's individual identity. Tea, coconut oil, sweater yarn, pooja threads, rangoli powder... His systems showed that the tower was precisely one hundred stories high. Seventy-seven more levels to go. And the sat scans had analyzed his first batch of data transmission: one hundred such towers ringed the perimeter of the disputed territory, each with a hundred levels. Assuming that each housed a successor, that meant a sum total of 10,100 women to be assassinated.

He stopped and re-examined his options.

"It will be easier if you accept it," said the 23rd avatar. A very diminutive young woman, barely more than a girl. A Maharashtrian, with the dark skin and black pupils

of the Dalits of the Deccan Plain, descendants of the ostracized scheduled castes of the 20th century, the "untouchables" that Mahatma Gandhi had renamed "harijans, children of God" and whom Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had renamed Dalits. She was weaving a shawl on a charkha, using her feet to grip the wooden spinney, and working steadily as she spoke. "The more you fight it, the harder it will be for you later."

He spoke with barely concealed anger, his frustration getting the better of his legendary self-control. "How do you do it? You transmit the genetic coding through orbitals? But then how do you effect the morphing? This kind of technology doesn't exist! It has to be some kind of illusion." But no illusion could deceive the massive processing power that he had accessed to check and recheck the 22 "impossible" transformations.

She worked the spinney, weaving the red, white and saffron strands of wool expertly as she spoke. "Is it so hard to accept, Envoy? You are Indian, like us. Not a Westerner with a mind fogged by science. You know that some things cannot be explained, only accepted."

He sat down wearily, his blood-splashed feet staining a pile of spotless white wool, not caring. She clucked her tongue and moved the wool aside, picking out the stained strands and putting them in a separate pile for cleaning later.

"All right," he said, deciding there would be no harm in a brief theoretical discussion while his systems sought a more scientific explanation. "Assume for the moment that you are all avatars of the Devi. But –"

"Nako re, baba," she said. "No, my brother. We are only women. Ordinary mortal women. Only when the living avatar of the Devi dies, then the next of us in line takes her place. Samjhe? Understood now?"

She reminded him irritatingly of his mausi, a paternal aunt who was always completely self-assured and unplaceable. He gritted his teeth in frustration.

"But how many times can it possibly happen? There has to be a limit!"

"Kashasaati limit?" she asked him in the matter-of-fact Maharashtrian way. "You know your religious mythology. A Goddess can be reborn infinite times, because a Goddess on the mortal plane is aatma, pure spirit. And an aatma cannot be killed. Read your *Bhagwad Gita* again. Weapons cannot cleave it, wind cannot blow it away, fire cannot burn it, water cannot dissolve it, earth cannot consume it, it is the soul immortal."

He was silent. The very same mausi had taught him this exact same verse from the *Gita*, in the original Sanskrit. With very little effort he could recall her sitting cross-legged before the wooden chaupat propping up the oversize hand-calligraphed copy of the *Bhagwad Gita*, chanting the Sanskrit slokas in that maddening, unforgettable singsong manner.

"Then there is only one solution," he said at last. And stood up.

She looked at him over the rims of her spectacles, pausing in her weaving.

"I have to nuke you all. Wipe out the whole of Kali in one shot. That way, there won't be any more bodies left

for your damned Goddess to take refuge in."

He walked away from her then paused. He really should kill her. He had said too much. Perhaps she had some way of informing her compatriots, of mounting a defence against the genocide he proposed.

But for some reason he couldn't bring himself to do it. He consoled himself with the thought that he would be killing them all anyway in a few moments.

As he walked away, the sound of the charka whirring began again behind him.

It took surprisingly long for him to secure the necessary permission to "salinate" the disputed territory. It was a final alternative listed in his command menu, and as the official Envoy to the rebels, he had the authority to take the decision. Kali had become a sore on the belly of United India over the last decade. The noises of commiseration from overseas had begun to sound more like rumbles of discontent, especially after so many American and European women had emigrated to the renegade "nation." His superiors had anticipated the need for a final solution and had sent him in with all the necessary preparations in place. They wanted this problem solved now, one way or the other, before the tri-annual summit of Non-Aligned Independent Nuclear Nations the following week in New Delhi.

He filed a charge of discovery of nuclear weapons and testing on Kali territory, proof of the renegades' terrorist intentions and capacity. He initiated a program that simulated a crisis situation developing on his arrival in the disputed territory. Reviewed later by the inevitable Human Rights panel, it would perfectly simulate a series of events in which all his accompanying officers and staffers were successively tortured and brutally killed by Kali terrorist troops and then he himself was taken on a tour of their formidable nuclear facility in order to inform and warn the world of Kali's intention to strike blind at India. There would be holes unfilled, and gaps, but they would only add to the authenticity of the whole charade.

The nuclear orbitals were positioned and armed, ready for release on his command.

He had retreated through the tunnel by this time, almost at the peripheral guard base from which he had entered.

The guards had offered no resistance at all, not even an attempt to stop him. He smiled at the absurdity of these people. And felt a rush of joy at their imminent destruction.

He triggered the nuclear orbital the moment he reached MSCD (minimum safe-care distance). In an instant, the gaudy afternoon sky over the flatlands were obscured by the familiar blinding flash and then the rising mushroom cloud. He whistled as he walked to the Rimmer he had left parked on the Indian side of the Line of Control. There was a welcoming committee waiting to greet him, to shake the hand of the man who had finally "solved" the Kali problem.

He allowed himself a smug smile of triumph and was about to offer his hand in greeting when the change took him.

"Agent Dravid?" said the PM-General, his smile wavering as he saw his most celebrated safe-care executive stagger and raise a hand to his forehead. "Are you feeling quite well?"

Dravid swung around, staring at the billowing cloud that marked the 230 square kilometres of land that had housed 700,000 renegade women until a few seconds ago. He raised his fist and shook it, his mouth opening in the rictus of a soundless scream.

"Damn you," he managed to choke out. And then the Change was done. When he turned back to the PM-General, the anger and hate were replaced by an expression of such calm serenity that it startled the supreme leader of United India far more than any act or gesture of violence would have done.

"I am Durga Maa," said the man formerly known as Envoy Dravid.

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Ashok Banker lives in Mumbai (Bombay), India, and is a much-published writer in his home country, author of books, TV scripts, newspaper articles, etc. The above is his first story to appear in a British or American sf or fantasy magazine, although he tells us that he has recently made a sale to *Weird Tales* in the United States.



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I'm really sorry about taping you to your chair, doc, but I just need someone to listen, and I know you'd just wig out if I told you straight, which is why I had to gag you with your thermals. Look, I admit my relationships with movies haven't always been that deep. I've always treated them as pretty disposable: something tickles your eye, you go in, have a good time, and forget all about it next morning. Those good-looking younger ones, you just can't keep your eyes off them, and it's so easy to get into a pattern of serial one-night stands. What can I say? I'm not a bad person; I'm just what you call susceptible.

But there I was on this date with *What Women Want*, and something happened that changed my head around. You know there's that awful first act where Mel Gibson is trying to be this God's-gift male chump, and you get this relentless bombardment of character notes over the titles explaining how he got that way: "He's like this total bachelor and the least politically-correct person in the universe... Once you understand about Nick's mother you understand Nick; she was a real honest-to-God Las Vegas showgirl... Since Nick didn't have a father, Nick's mother had him surrounded by strong male role models..." And you start to feel wound up at the way they feel obliged to concoct a kind of idiotic superhero-origin story just to explain why the character is so 2D, until by the time you've had all the clonking exposition you just want to stuff it and

get out. So when you finally make it past the pointless Connery and Sinatra impersonations to the bit where Mel gets electrocuted in the bath while hilariously plastered in feminine product placements and wakes up miraculously able to read women's minds, the irritation has built up to critical level; and it was as if something just went ZAP! in my head, because when I woke up from my stupor I found I was able to read the minds of movies.

And you know, it's amazing. It's just like Mel says about the women whose heads he's peeping: "They worry. All the time. About everything." *What Women Want* has this brash hostage title promising the target audience something all movies are desperate to deliver, but beneath it is this deep anxiety about whether anybody knows, cares, or (worst of all) is willing to shell out for a hit. At first it's hard to filter all the jumble of confused signals that are streaming at you, but after a while the between-the-lines stuff falls into a kind of mental italics, like a page of Frank Herbert come to life. *What do women want in a male lead? what do they want him to want in them? how do we give them what they want and still give their dates what their dates want?*

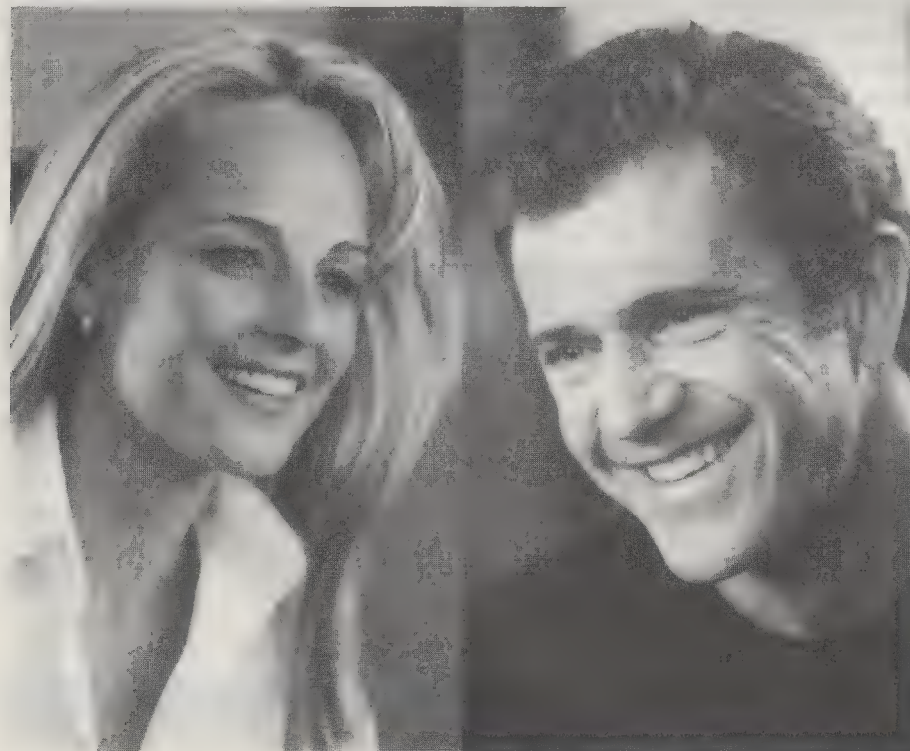
Take the Helen Hunt character, who's written with such agonizing care that she comes out if anything rather more interesting than the script intends her to be. *Is she professional enough? good-looking enough? about the right level of insecure? is*

anyone actually going to identify with her? should we have cast someone more appealing? was it a mistake to hire Ronnie Spector (!!!!!) as her makeup person? For an ambitious female top exec, she's staggeringly non-judgmental even about complete plonkheads like the pre-reconstructed Mel ("Hm: this guy's kind of exciting!"), always ready to see the appealing side of a character when it's not even visible to the audience. *We don't dare give her any threatening or hostile thoughts, especially about Mel.*

More than anything, you see, WWW is terrified of its leading man's power. "A man's man is the leader of the pack, the kind of man other men look up to." *Does this script love its star enough yet? can we lay it on any thicker? how do we make him repulsive without making him actually repel anyone?* Complete strangers congratulate him on his chat-up: "Sir, that was inspiring." Colleagues agree: "You're like a genius, you know that?" A comprehensively-pleasured Marisa Tomei can only gasp: "Ladies and gentlemen, Nick Marshall is a sex god!" Fortunately for the title question, Mel's pack-leader career ambition depends on researching the answer, so that once inside the ladies' heads he continues to delve where lesser guys would throw up and get out; and even more fortunately, he's a top-of-his-league professional communicator who has absolutely no trouble at all finding the words to address and resolve women's secret desires once he has them down on his jotter.

The glum irony is that *What Women Want* exposes its female characters to the male gaze in a more invasive, objectifying, squirm-inducing degree than anything in cinema this side of hardcore. Hunt's character, initially a threatening figure wielding castrating levels of professional self-empowerment, is displayed to peeping-tom scrutiny through the psychic equivalent of a hole in the shower-room wall, and subjected to a fantasy of male power and control that undermines all pretence of reforming cinema's chest-thumping sexual politics. Even Mel's unreconstructed guyness is really all his mom's fault for being a 1960s girly cliché object in the first place; and though his character gradually learns unease at playing Hollow Man with women's heads, the film itself has fewer qualms — preserving its male characters' psychic privacy while showing women as vulnerable, exposed, and gagging for what only Mel Gibson can give them. *Well, that's the trouble with chicks: they don't know themselves what they want, apart from a prom dress, commitment, and leading men who can answer their unspoken thoughts without the use of*

Facing page: Willem Dafoe in *The Shadow of the Vampire*.
Below: Helen Hunt and Mel Gibson in *What Women Want*



invasive psychic techniques. What they really want, if only the ditzes had the sense to know it, is a trained professional male who can go in undercover for a few days and Hoover it out of their heads, then market it back to them at a value-added premium.

For, in the end, the only reason it matters to movies to know what women want is that their job depends on being able to sell it to them. WWW's own anxiety about this brief is all too visible in its agonized self-reflexivity, the movie equivalent of chewed fingernails. The whole plot is set in a creative agency (advertising rather than movies, but that's as much distance as we get), with a female director hired with the specific task of proving herself by helming a major contract that will go after the massive chick market. We had to hire a woman director for ass-cover credibility, but we took the precaution of having a guy work on the script. The turning-point of the movie is the screening of Mel & Hel's Nike ad, a potent piece of marketing that breaks new ground in product placement: not only is the ad a genuinely brilliant one, but it's packaged by the script in terms that affirm and promote Nike's identity as a brand rather than a product line, punching into the difficult female market with a reach that goes beyond what mere adverts alone can deliver. "Nike," we are told by our pro role-model heroine, "is state-of-the-art hard-core women power" — and absolutely NOT third-world sweatshops employing child labour at wage levels below even local norms, then marked up with colossal added value from sports figures who could buy the whole factory out of their product-endorsement fee.

And yet, the creepiest thing of all is it starts to get to you. To see so transparently inside the head of a film so hopelessly well-meant, so laboriously crafted, and so very insecure just defies you to treat it with the careless contempt any normal red-blooded viewer would. But then just as you find yourself daring to believe this might actually be a genuinely intelligent chickflick with interesting and dangerous things to say about head manipulation in the all-too-gendered world of Hollywood voyeurism, Mel gets another shock and loses his mind-peeping ability, and suddenly the whole film snaps back to cheesy star-romance formula. And somewhere in his big apology speech, when you're sitting there and thinking "Why do actors make so many head movements when they're doing climactic monologues? Can't he keep still? What is this movie *thinking* of?" you realize you've lost the power to empathize with it, and all you can see is another dumb Hollywood formula ending.



I only wish I could still summon the gift, because I absolutely haven't a clue what anyone was thinking when they made *Shadow of the Vampire*, except that an American film made in Luxemburg with BBC money and Tango as Official Sponsor was probably less than assured of the confidence of more mainstream investors. A bizarre caprice of cinematic onanism, it's a film without any evident audience: a self-reflexive horror comedy about the making of Murnau's *Nosferatu*, on the premise that, rather than the other way about, star player Max Schreck was actually a fictional character played by Count Graf Orlok the vampire. Like most things in the film, this conceit is a strange fusion of inspired brilliance and baffling pointlessness. Those in a position to appreciate the jokes will for the most part be that audience sector so inexplicably under-targeted by everyday studio product, silent-film anoraks specializing in the golden age of Weimar Neubabelsburg; but those are precisely the viewers likely to be most bemused by the scenario's breezy anachronisms, biographical nonsenses, and disdain for actual film history.

Insofar as there's much pretence of a point to it all, it's in the meretricious parallels drawn between cinema and vampirism, with John Malkovich's tyrannical Murnau stealing the lives of his cast and crew to transform them into immortal celluloid undead, to the accompaniment of such drily portentous aphorisms as "We are scientists engaged in the creation of memory!"

and "Time will no longer be a dark spot upon our lungs!" It's all reasonably amusing, with fun performances by Malkovich and Eddie Izzard (as leading man Gustav von Wangenheim), and a full-on astonishing one by Willem Dafoe as Schreck/Orlok himself. The original's sets, performances, and footage are all lovingly pastiched, and the vampire's account of his expert reaction to Stoker's *Dracula* is poignant, perceptive, and fine. But the plot is flimsy, with awkward recourse to period intertitles for scenes elided from the narrative, and for all its charms and originality it still has a bit of the texture of a half-baked Euro-pudding with too much egg and not nearly enough fruity bits.

Oh, sure, doc, I know what you'd say: the idea that movies can be intelligent and purposeful is all a delusional figment, WWW is nothing more than an interestingly-premised movie with a dismal beginning and end around an unusually well-made middle, and there aren't really any voices in my head apart from the ones that the CIA beam in through my fillings. Hahahahahahaha, doc, you're a card; next you'll be trying to tell me there aren't messages on my ticket stub where it keeps calling me GAGA, and the flies buzzing in and out your eye sockets aren't my friends. I really like the way you listen, doc; with all the stuff those movies put in my head, I sometimes think these sessions of ours are all that keeps me from going psycho. Same time next Thursday?

Nick Lowe

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Another amazing sf prophecy: "This brilliantly conceived novel explores what happens when the computer is used to further the world ambitions of the dictator of a tiny desert state and of the unscrupulous commercial organization INTEL." Thus the blurb for *Andromeda Breakthrough* by Fred Hoyle and John Elliot, 1964.

THE LIVING END

Gordon R. Dickson (1923-2001), Canadian-born US sf author of note since the 1950s and best known for his long, ambitious Dorsai/Childe Cycle beginning with *Necromancer* in 1962, died on 31 January. He was a popular and convivial figure at conventions.

Josh Kirby rushed me a jubilant letter about our mighty Public Lending Right bounty for library loans of *A Cosmic Cornucopia*: "I've blown 27p on a 1st class stamp, but what to do with the remaining 10p???... I'll discuss it with my investment manager."

Professor A. M. Low, celebrated by sf lovers and by Thog for his seminal hard-sf epic *Adrift in the Stratosphere*, also wrote a book of futurology called *Conquering Space and Time*. This, peering into the distant future from 1937, prophesies... mobile phones. "The telephone may develop to a stage where it is unnecessary to enter a special call-box. We shall think no more of telephoning to our office from our cars or railway-carriages than we do today of telephoning from our homes." Good for Prof. Low! His vision of futurity continues: "We shall each carry a small apparatus as we carry a watch and simply plug it into one of thousands of points at the roadside."

Dean R. Koontz's sf innovation in *From the Corner of His Eye* was

reported by reviewer Janet Maslin: "As Mr Koontz modestly notes in an afterword, this is the first time to his knowledge that human relationships and quantum mechanics have been linked in a work of fiction. What this boils down to is the book's theory that there are for each of us multiple realities: for instance, one in which Junior's wife was pushed off a water tower, one in which she wasn't..." (*New York Times*, 8 January) Possibly Mr Koontz doesn't read a lot of sf.

Michael Moorcock sends another scoop: "We have at last produced the one-stop sci-fi fan all-purpose GM meal. That's right, Mr Langford – we have successfully crossed a Big Mac with a Raymond E. Feist novel. Now all we have to do is produce the Super-Mac – we take the MacFeist and cross it with an episode of *Xena, Warrior Princess*. This will be a serious blow to Books & Cappuccino 'R Us."

Stan Nicholls was unexpectedly refused entry to the USA for last year's World Fantasy Convention, because US Immigration held him responsible for overstaying his visa by one day in the 1970s when his flight home to Britain was delayed by bad weather. He even had to pay air fare for his own deportation, although a whip-round at WFC later helped with the extra expenses.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Publishers and Sinners. *Playboy* magazine decided that a full-time fiction editor is nowadays too great a "luxury," and said goodbye to their sf-friendly editor Alice Turner. Meanwhile it's rumoured that Ringpull Press (which famously launched Jeff Noon's career) is being revived.

As Others See Us. "Asimov is a scientific sci-fi writer and his laws are best known from the film *Robocop*." (Kieren McCarthy, *The Register*)

Medical Gloom. Poul Anderson has been diagnosed with prostate cancer ("Treatment is already showing good results... he and the family are not at all downhearted," writes Karen Anderson), and Peter Nicholls of *SF Encyclopedia* fame with Parkinson's disease. "My doctor tells me that though the disease does cause cognitive damage, I don't have any yet. Unfortunately, the tests I passed with 100% accuracy include really difficult questions like 'What's your name?' and 'Where are you?'"

Thog's Blurb Masterclass. "... a tense and exciting adventure with subterranean reptile men – SILURIANS – and a 40 ft. high *Tyrannosaurus rex*, the biggest, most savage mammal

which ever trod the earth!" (Malcolm Hulke, *Doctor Who and the Cave Monsters*, 1974, aka *Doctor Who: The Silurians*; blurb unchanged through six printings)

2000 Novel Awards. *Philip K. Dick Award* shortlist for best original US sf paperback: *The Bridge*, Janine Ellen Young; *Broken Time*, Maggie Thomas; *Call From a Distant Shore*, Stephen L. Burns; *Evolution's Darling*, Scott Westerfeld; *Midnight Robber*, Nalo Hopkinson; *Only Forward*, Michael Marshall Smith. *BSFA Award* shortlist for best British-published sf: *Perdido Street Station*, China Miéville; *redRobe*, Jon Courtenay Grimwood; *Paradox*, John Meaney; *Revelation Space*, Alastair Reynolds; *Ash: A Secret History*, Mary Gentle.

Tense Moment. Fans were alarmed by the 6 January entry in *Arthur C. Clarke's 2001 SF Calendar*, which informs us: "One of the leading British science fiction authors and winner of the Australian Ditmar Award in 1970, Brian Aldiss was also a prophetic writer..." Was? Brian confirmed in an exclusive interview that he, in fact, is.

Yo-Ho-Ho! Keith Brooke reports a huge web archive of stolen texts at www.sym.pad.net/books/download/content.htm, based in Russia. Much sf is included: when I looked, the recent-acquisitions list was crammed with pirated Larry Niven novels. Sic 'em, Larry!

Nebula Awards. All novellas on the too-long-to-list preliminary ballot are also finalists, since there are only five: "Fortitude" by Andy Duncan (*Realms of Fantasy* 6/99); "Ninety Percent of Everything" by Jonathan Lethem, James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel (*F&SF* 9/99); "Hunting the Snark" by Mike Resnick (*Asimov's* 12/99); "Crocodile Rock" by Lucius Shepard (*F&SF* 10/99); "Argonautica" by Walter Jon Williams (*Asimov's* 10/99).

R.I.P. The 26 January issue of Paula Guran's horror e-newsletter *DarkEcho* was the last. This ran to 300-odd issues and well over a million words since 1994, and made history as the first e-publication to win a Stoker award.

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Prehensile Breasts.* "Good Night, Farder Coram," she said politely, clutching the alethiometer to her breast and scooping up Pantalaimon with the other." (Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights*, 1995) "The flies left his mouth like tiny words." (*Ibid*) *Dept of After-Dinner Conversation.* "But at this point their hostess firmly put an end to the morbid discussion by collecting the ladies' eyes." (Nicholas Blake, *The Corpse in the Snowman*, 1941)

Wormholes

Roy Gray

“I’m sorry about the late hour, gentlemen, and for the short notice but we only received permission to stop the traffic yesterday, and that only for 3 to 5 this morning.” Professor Gunning repeated his sentence in German, French and Italian and apologized in Spanish for his lackings in that language. “I’m going to continue in English but there is a simultaneous translation for those who need it. There are earphones at the front here for those who want them.” He pointed at a table to his left.

The rack of headphones remained undisturbed. No one needed them.

“We live in four dimensions, three of space plus one of time. We think there may be something like tunnels linking separate parts of our universe. They would bore through a fourth spatial dimension, outside this space and time. A wormhole, as we call such a passage, could join an entry mouth here in Geneva, 2012, to an exit in London, 1999. It would act as a short cut between the two.” The small audience was silent, perhaps anxious to start.

“Well, of course, we cannot visualize in four spatial dimensions. In fact most of us have problems with three.” Professor Gunning chuckled at his own joke. His audience, mostly reporters, did not laugh but a few, probably the native English speakers, smiled. Gunning was partly bald with white hair, unusual now that hair restoration was so easy. Wearing tweed he looked every inch the cliché professor of physics. “We avoid that problem with analogy,” he stated. “Many of you are familiar with the balloon-surface picture of the universe I’m sure?”

His audience gave no clues to their knowledge. Gunning pulled a black floppy balloon out of his pocket. It had white dots painted on it in a random-looking pattern. “We draw dots on this surface to represent galaxies and, as the balloon expands, they move apart.” He began to inflate the balloon to demonstrate the effect. “It depicts the expanding universe in two dimensions, three if we include time. That enables most people to grasp the idea of an expanding four-dimensional space,” he finished,

after taking the balloon from his lips.

“Imagine the space inside as a dimension hidden from any surface dwellers. Their limited 2D-view prevents its recognition or detection.” He blew the balloon up to a rigid sausage shape. Then, breathing hard, he pinched the end closed with his right finger and thumb and aimed it at his audience. “We now believe there are millions of parallel universes all separate and differing from their near – ‘near’ is a poor word here – neighbours in very small ways. They do differ radically from the... furthest... of their kind. So, by our analogy, each of these universes is a similar surface making our balloon multi-layered, like an onion.

“So our theory has adjacent layers almost identical. The differences grow as they get further apart.” He released the balloon and laughed as it squirted towards the ducking reporters. It curled away with a loud wheezy whine and wasted its burden of air trying to penetrate the ceiling before falling to the floor. “So in a million Universes maybe thousands of replicas of myself have released a balloon, but many have traced other paths. Some to die in that same spot by the fire hydrant, the rest in other corners and places.”

The Professor held up a half-metre length of black flexible hose so that it dangled from his right hand. Each end flared to the same trumpet shape, a hand’s length in diameter. “Here is our model of a wormhole, greatly exaggerated in size I should say. This ten-millimetre bore tube connecting the open ends...” He ran his left hand down the tube from top to bottom. “...can be imagined as worming, or threading, through part of the onion before returning to this universe, back here where the lower end is anchored. Is that clear?”

Everyone looked doubtful but remained silent. Then a news-team video camera at the back of the room whined softly as a lens moved. The man behind the camera spoke. “How deep into the onion does the tube loop? And what do you call the combined set of universes? Cosmic Onion doesn’t seem up to the usual standard of physics terminology, you know... like, quasar, boson and

Gaia.”

“Both good points, Mr Crenshaw. In the first case we hope to find that out as part of this test. But I should say that in reality, if I can use such a phrase here, the first wormhole mouth is expected connect to another skin of the onion, one of the parallel universes, rather than return to this one. The other mouth here, my second wormhole mouth, will probably be the termination of a second wormhole originating in one of those parallel universes. There, no doubt, a parallel Professor Karl Gunning is telling his audience that we have several choice names; such as Cosmiverse, Plenum, Multiverse.” He paused and smiled. “If I prove those universes do exist then I choose and, as an old science-fiction reader, I favour ‘Sevagram.’

“Soon we hope to answer some fundamental questions. Do parallel universes really exist and, if they do, how densely are they packed? How often do they separate, do they ever merge together again and how do they differ if you section the onion?”

Professor Gunning threaded his way through ranks of desks with glowing display screens and crossed to a bank of unattended monitors. He stopped by a thick glass window overlooking Detector Hall Three.

Six reporters followed him carrying their media packs. Multilingual “Accelerator in Use” and “Beam Line On” warning lights were flashing in the vast cavern visible from the window. It was crammed full of equipment but otherwise deserted.

“Dr Hamed Khalili will stay with us to comment on tonight’s events,” Denton Marks announced to the BBC EuroNews cameras.

Crenshaw, both producer and cameraman, was providing the video stream for all the stations. Marks was his presenter. The control room was too crowded for everyone to set up. “Take three, sorry.” He nodded to Hamed, who stood up.

“From the beginning?” Hamed smiled towards the camera. In the mirror mounted next to the lens aperture he saw his beard was starting to reappear. It had been a long day and he had no chance to shave again now.

“No. The Prof’s description of a wormhole was fine. Just explain what’s happening but mention the race with Fermilab to add a bit of human interest and colour. OK?” Crenshaw never looked up from his monitor.

Hamed studied his monitor screens and prompt then, after a deep breath, “Out there,” he pointed at the window, “you see Detector Hall Three and CERN’s accelerator storage ring. Inside it huge pulses of electrically charged atoms, called ions, are racing round at near the speed of light. The positive ions clockwise and the negative, anti-clockwise. Soon we will slam them into specially designed targets, one from each direction. This will form a wormhole linking the two. Then, if our calculations and timing are right, it will be stabilized by bursts of unstable short-life particles fired into each mouth.” Hamed paused, peering down at Crenshaw’s graphic. “Fermilab, in the USA, and CERN have been racing to do similar experiments and we are only days ahead. That

is why the local authorities have been so swift to grant permission. Getting such a fast response from both the French and Swiss is impossible normally.”

“So how big is the wormhole and how long will it last?” Marks always spoke direct to the cameras.

Crenshaw signalled for Hamed to do the same, making turning motions while holding his hands either side of his face.

Hamed looked up again, “The target plates will finish ten millimetres apart, just less than a half inch,” he remembered the US audience, “and the wormhole diameter will be tiny. We would need an electron microscope to see it. However, although it might twist, or turn and loop in its path through Professor Gunning’s onion, it has no length as we know it.”

“Rather small for us to do any time travelling?” Marks said.

Hamed stroked his cheek in thought, “When the pulse strikes Target Two it pushes it back very fast for about ten metres until it almost touches Target One. The acceleration is so high that a relativistic time delay of an attosecond, a very tiny fraction of a second, is introduced between the two ends of the wormhole as it’s formed.”

“So you won’t be able to tell me next week’s lottery numbers very far in advance?”

Hamed laughed, “No you need time-travel through a bigger wormhole to do that. The problem is that we expect you to end up in a parallel universe. That makes it hard to profit from the information, though your parallel self in that universe might, if it’s not too different from this one.”

“Is this wormhole dangerous and how do you close it if something happens?” Marks asked as Crenshaw signalled them to continue.

“It’s too narrow. A virus can’t get through, nor could an atom. If by some zillion-to-one chance it connected to the centre of a neutron star and something did emerge we have very sensitive detectors ready to shut off the particle feed from the reserve stacked in the beam.” Hamed saw the slight glaze in Mark’s eyes before he turned back to the camera, so hurriedly he added: “Unstable particles have a short life. They decay, so we keep them circulating in the beam at near the speed of light and feed them, in brief pulses, into the wormhole mouths. The special type of energy their decay releases prevents the holes closing. When we shut it off the wormhole will collapse fairly rapidly.”

“Ahh!” Marks said. “Time dilation. At the speed of light particles don’t decay because time goes very slowly compared with our time.” He sounded pleased with himself. “So without any of these particles the wormhole closes?”

“Uhhmm, not quite.” Hamed paused to think. “The wormhole has what we call a half-life and this is very short, less than an attosecond. Remember that?”

“Yes,” Mark replied, “a tiny fraction of a microsecond. Am I right?”

“Yes and the half-life means that if you have a lot of wormholes, say a hundred, then – on average – 50 will disappear in the first half-life time period, another 25 in the next, then 12 and so on. However when you are down

to one left it could last a lot of half-lives before it finally disappears because the chance of any particular worm-hole closing is completely random." Hamed paused and looked at the monitor again. No activity yet, so he continued. "When you have large numbers the statistics are in your favour. Like being in a crowd of strangers, if it's big enough some will share a birthday. Then as people go, and numbers fall, the chance decreases. Eventually the odds are that none of those left have the same birth date."

Crenshaw spoke. "I've fed in a graphic. Leave that now."

"So one wormhole could last a long time. Is that safe?"

Marks asked.

“If it lasts a million half-lives, which is extremely unlikely, it’s still much less than a microsecond so safety isn’t a concern,” Hamed answered. “I ought to explain how we detect the parallel worlds soon.”

"OK. Do it now, I'll add a graphic." Crenshaw glanced up.

"This is the crux of the experiment. The target plates are mounted in the world's most expensive tensile testing machine." Hamed stopped speaking while the display ran on his monitor. It explained the subject by showing an instrument stretching a rope overlaid on a rising graph illustrating the increasing force. When the rope snapped the trace dropped back suddenly and lines zipped across the screen to show how the breaking strain was measured. When it switched to a simulation of the CERN experiment he continued. "Our instrument is so sensitive that French and Swiss Railways have stopped all the trains passing near CERN and the police will close all the local roads to anything other than cyclists, pedestrians and emergency services. Hence the 3 am Sunday start, they can't do that in the day."

Crenshaw glanced up.

"The instrument is very sensitive to vibration," Hamed answered the unspoken question.

"We will use it to measure both the force required to pull the targets, which means the wormhole mouths, apart and the distance they move. If there are a multitude of neighbouring parallel universes similar wormholes will be forming in many of them and they should get tangled up with our wormhole. That will leave little steps in the trace of the force and distance between the targets. As each entanglement occurs the force to separate our wormhole mouths increases. If there are mostly even numbers of these steps then we have two wormholes, which means we are connected to another universe. A majority of odd-number steps means we aren't connected and no steps means no parallel worlds. It's a beautiful experiment." Hamed's voice rang with enthusiasm. "Electronic and instrument noise could spoil our results so we'll even stop pulling on the targets for short intervals to listen for background interference. We can subtract signals detected on the set of dummy plates from those found on the target plates to reveal the events we want." He stopped to look across at his monitors.

"Time yet," Crenshaw called. "The traffic is not clear yet apparently."

Hamed glanced at the output traces from the sensors

mounted on the duplicate plates. They were still too noisy. He explained their meaning and then described how laser interferometers measured movement and currents in the electromagnets tracked the forces. Both methods gave exquisite sensitivity over a vast range. They could measure forces from Femtonewtons to Tonnes.

There was a shout from Professor Gunning's end of the room. "We're starting. Remember: watch for steps on that force-display monitor and listen for clicks on those speakers. Each one means another layer to the onion skin, a whole separate but parallel universe."

I'll keep quiet, thought Hamed. Karl deserves his moment in the limelight.

“The targets are set to separate extremely slowly so we can pick up every scrap of data,” Gunning said. He paused... “Now, the wormhole is established and the tensile tester is pulling the...”

CLICK CLICK. The team manning control panels and computer banks filling the back of the room cheered. CLICK CLICK.

"Silence." CLICK CLICK. "No noise, please," said the Professor. CLICKICK.

"Sounds like a" – CLICKICK CLICKICK – "Geiger counter" – CLICKICKICKICK – Marks whispered to Hamed without turning to camera. CLICKICKICKICK. "Do half-lives carry across parallel universes?" CLICKICKICKICK. "If they do you seem to" – CLICKICKICKICK – "have a lot of wormholes to decay."

Do half-lives carry across parallel universes? The question had an ominous ring. CLICKICKICKICKICKICK. Hamed punched the keys to pause the target's movement just as the trace rose in another burst of steps on his monitor, but it kept rising. CLICKICKICKICKICKICK. CLICKICKICKICKICKICK.

Gunning looked over from across the room. He ignored his own request for silence. "Why have you stopped?" Clickickickickickick. Clickickickickickick.

“Why haven’t the interactions slowed?” – Clickickickickickick. Clickickickickickick – Hamed asked in a puzzled tone. Clickickickickickickclickickickickickick.

“The earth’s rotation?” Marks murmured, almost drowned out by Clickickickickickickclickickickickickick.

Earth rotates, Earth orbits sun, sun orbits galaxy, galaxies stream to – Clickickickickickickclickickickick-
ickicklickickickickickickclickickickickickick – the great
attractor, Hamed thought. “Allah be merciful. STOP THE
FEED NOW.” He rushed towards the beam-line console.

Clikikikikiklikikikikikikikikikikiklikikikikikik.
A rumbly squeal resonated around the control room.

Too late. The earthquakes had started.

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A while ago, I was approached by a German editor who was conducting a global survey of science fiction writers and critics, asking us to list... I wish I could recall what it was exactly. I *think* it was our choices for the ten best science fiction stories of the twentieth century, but it may well have been the ten best novels, writers, or something else. As a matter of courtesy, I probably should have responded; however, as demonstrated by my inability to even remember the assignment, I could muster no enthusiasm for the task.

I will acknowledge, right from the start, that some special circumstances in the science fiction world definitely demand list-making of some sort: anthologists of previous published stories, in assembling their collections, necessarily compile lists of "the greatest science fiction stories ever written that fit the parameters of this anthology." And college professors teaching science fiction classes, in planning their assignments, necessarily compile lists of "the ten best science fiction books to represent the genre to students."

Yet these sorts of lists have often been discussed elsewhere; so, to demonstrate the perils and pitfalls of list-making, I will consider the unique challenge that confronted the researchers of Whitehall Line when they set out to create a card game of "Science Fiction Authors." To adapt a standard deck of playing cards for this game, one selects 13 authors (for each rank of card) and four works per author (to represent each card in each suit). Several years ago, I received "Science Fiction Authors" as a Christmas present, and since I recall no

The Three Most Important Reasons Why Gary Westfahl Doesn't Compile Science Fiction Lists

Gary Westfahl

mentions of this strange artefact in print, I will list, as of 1991 (the game's copyright date), Whitehall's honour roll of the world's greatest science fiction writers and books (with titles given exactly as they appear on the cards) [see panel below]

Comments, anyone?

About the selection of authors: to be charitable, the choices reflect some knowledge of the genre, and regardless of personal tastes, almost everyone would agree that seven of them – Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke, Heinlein, Le Guin, Verne, and Wells – are indisputably credible. And, granting that the absence of a separate deck of "Fantasy Authors" mandates some representatives from science fiction's sister genre, one might also embrace the selection of Tolkien and Lewis (since I would regard Lewis primarily as a writer of fantasy, not science fiction). It is the game-maker's other four choices that strike me as ques-

tionable. Many may feel comfortable placing Herbert and Zelazny among the genre's greatest, but I personally feel that Herbert's successes with the *Dune* series, and Zelazny's brilliances of the 1960s, do not fully qualify them for science fiction's elite class. And the final two choices – Dickson and Anthony – with all due respect to their admirers, simply must be laughed out of court.

The book selections similarly reflect both a certain degree of knowledge and a certain degree of cluelessness. While one could quibble about key omissions like Asimov's *I, Robot*, Clarke's *Childhood's End*, and Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*, the choices for those authors are generally reasonable (though I'm not sure whether the reference is to Asimov's collection *Nightfall and Other Stories* [1969] or the Asimov/Robert Silverberg novelization *Nightfall* [1990]), as are the choices for Bradbury, Lewis, and Tolkien. But other lists resemble random gatherings of titles – as is true of Heinlein, where one finds two of his masterpieces incongruously accompanied by two of his worst clunkers – and Wells is even represented by one novel that is not science fiction by any conceivable definition (*The History of Mr Polly*).

How, then, might one design an improved version of "Science Fiction Authors" that would better epitomize the genre's best writers and works? Having expressed concerns about at least four of the current authors, I am obliged to suggest alternatives, and that is hardly difficult. The most egregious omissions, I believe, are Olaf Stapledon, a massive and lingering

Ace of Spades Ace of Hearts Ace of Diamonds Ace of Clubs	Piers Anthony	<i>A Spell for Chameleon</i> <i>Juxtaposition</i> <i>On a Pale Horse</i> <i>Split Infinity</i>	Seven of Diamonds Seven of Clubs		<i>Perelandra</i> <i>That Hideous Strength</i>
Two of Spades Two of Hearts Two of Diamonds Two of Clubs	Jules Verne	<i>20,000 Leagues under the Sea</i> <i>The Mysterious Island</i> <i>Around the World in Eighty Days</i> <i>A Journey to the Centre of the Earth</i>	Eight of Spades Eight of Hearts Eight of Diamonds Eight of Clubs	Robert A. Heinlein	<i>Stranger in a Strange Land</i> <i>Rocket Ship Galileo</i> <i>The Cat Who Walks Through Walls</i> <i>Double Star</i>
Three of Spades Three of Hearts Three of Diamonds Three of Clubs	Ray Bradbury	<i>The Illustrated Man</i> <i>The Martian Chronicles</i> <i>Fahrenheit 451</i> <i>Something Wicked This Way Comes</i>	Nine of Spades Nine of Hearts Nine of Diamonds Nine of Clubs	Ursula K. Le Guin	<i>The Left Hand of Darkness</i> <i>The Eye of the Heron</i> <i>The Dispossessed</i> <i>The Beginning Place</i>
Four of Spades Four of Hearts Four of Diamonds Four of Clubs	Isaac Asimov	<i>Foundation</i> <i>The Caves of Steel</i> <i>The Gods Themselves</i> <i>Nightfall</i>	Ten of Spades Ten of Hearts Ten of Diamonds Ten of Clubs	Frank Herbert	<i>Dune</i> <i>Whipping Star</i> <i>The Dragon in the Sea</i> <i>The Green Brain</i>
Five of Spades Five of Hearts Five of Diamonds Five of Clubs	Arthur C. Clarke	<i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> <i>Against the Fall of Night</i> <i>Rendezvous with Rama</i> <i>The Fountains of Paradise</i>	Jack of Spades Jack of Hearts Jack of Diamonds Jack of Clubs	Roger Zelazny	<i>This Immortal</i> <i>Changeling</i> <i>Lord of Light</i> <i>Damnation Alley</i>
Six of Spades Six of Hearts Six of Diamonds Six of Clubs	H. G. Wells	<i>The Invisible Man</i> <i>The History of Mr Polly</i> <i>The War of the Worlds</i> <i>The Time Machine</i>	Queen of Spades Queen of Hearts Queen of Diamonds Queen of Clubs	Gordon R. Dickson	<i>Time Storm</i> <i>Master of Everon</i> <i>Mutants</i> <i>None But Man</i>
Seven of Spades Seven of Hearts	C. S. Lewis	<i>The Screwtape Letters</i> <i>The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe</i>	King of Spades King of Hearts King of Diamonds King of Clubs	J. R. R. Tolkien	<i>The Hobbit</i> <i>The Two Towers</i> <i>The Return of the King</i> <i>The Fellowship of the Ring</i>

influence on the entire genre, and William Gibson, still the most intriguing of our recent authors. For purely sentimental reasons, I would nominate Clifford D. Simak, and others with different sentiments could mount powerful cases for Brian W. Aldiss, J. G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick, and Harlan Ellison, to name only a few. Also, worried about the preponderance of white, male, English-speaking authors in the deck, some might prefer other credible choices like Octavia E. Butler, Samuel R. Delany, Stanislaw Lem, Mary Shelley, and Boris and Arkady Strugatsky. Then, once the new candidates are anointed, there remain the secondary tasks of choosing four works to represent those authors and improving the lists of works previously chosen to represent retained authors.

So, for all those who gather in pubs on Friday nights to discuss science fiction, I bequeath to you this topic for debate, which will occupy as many hours as you care to devote to it, and which is positively guaranteed to never lead to a final choice of authors and works that everyone will agree on. But you'll get no further help from me – because, barring the extraordinarily unlikely event of Whitehall Line hiring me as a paid consultant to oversee a revised edition of "Science Fiction Authors," I won't be giving this matter, or any similar question, another moment of thought.

Why not? In the first place, as conscientious anthologists and college professors know, it's hard work, confronting a vast array of possible choices and boiling everything down to a small list of well-chosen, exemplary items. Second, in a world already plagued by disharmony and pain, generating lists of the best, the weirdest, or the whatever of anything simply inspires additional disharmony and pain, as the creation of lists may divide lifelong friends, who discover to their displeasure that they have vastly divergent opinions on previously unimagined questions, and the publication of lists may hurt the feelings of writers, who feel that their names or works have been unjustly omitted.

Still, I have demonstrated before that I am willing to work hard, and willing to inspire disharmony and pain, if I believe there is some worthwhile reason for doing so, whether it be to promulgate new ideas, draw attention to neglected issues, or (rarely, it seems) bring a smile to some reader's face. The third reason I avoid list-making is that I can discern no real purpose in the activity. Except in special circumstances such as those described above, it is only a game, a way to kill some time, and nothing more than that.

You play the game by first choosing a

number – "ten" is the usual choice, but any number will do. Then, you choose a phrase describing an entirely subjective judgment: "the best," "the most over-rated," "the funniest," and so on. Finally, you choose a category of science fiction items to be evaluated, such as "novels," "writers," "films," or sub-categories like "women writers" or "British films." One could put lists of numbers, phrases, and categories in three columns and instruct participants to choose one from Column A, one from Column B, and one from Column C; with ten items on each list, your array would generate 1,000 possible arguments: this week, "the 25 / most unusual / science fiction environments," next week, "the ten / most important / science fiction artists," and the week after that... Or, if some combinations don't generate vigorous debate, you can get additional ideas by consulting two books that are stuffed with various lists: Mike Ashley's *The Illustrated Book of Science Fiction Lists* (1982) and Maxim Jakubowski and Malcolm Edwards's *The SF Book of Lists* (1983).

But is there is any real reason for these endless exercises in list-making? I can think of some possible answers, but find none of them persuasive.

To publicize significant works or writers that aren't receiving their proper share of attention? Perhaps; that is, if I offered my list of "the ten greatest science fiction movies" and included the obscure *Doin' Time on Planet Earth* (1988) alongside better-known films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), that might encourage some people to seek out and view that remarkable film. Yet if that is my goal, wouldn't it be better accomplished by, say, writing a short essay on the film? Also, when people like that German editor compile the votes of many people to produce group lists, it is precisely these sorts of unexpected, idiosyncratic candidates that will be lost in a sea of routine, predictable choices.

To bolster the egos of the creative people whose names or works appear on such lists? Just possibly, but remember, we're not talking about the Pulitzer Prizes or Academy Awards here. Would it really warm the cockles of Paul Di Filippo's heart more than one or two degrees, for instance, if he happened to see his name come in at number seven on someone's list of "The 20 Most Underrated Science Fiction Writers"?

To gather important data about the interests and opinions of various members of the science fiction community? Perhaps to a limited extent; that is, the fact that stories like Asimov's "Nightfall," Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder" and Clarke's "The Sentinel" regularly dominate lists of most-fre-

quently-anthologized science fiction stories says something about what readers value in short fiction, and the fact that novels like Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Wells's *The Time Machine* regularly dominate lists of most-frequently-assigned texts in science fiction classes says something about how academics view science fiction. Yet these compilations never resemble a truly scientific survey, and finding out the majority opinion about some issue at a given time is not always useful in determining the best position to take. If, for example, I am choosing stories for my own anthology, or books for my own science fiction class, I shouldn't allow myself to be influenced by which works have been most often favoured in the past; rather, I should make my own best choices, seeking (if only in a tiny way) to improve on the collective wisdom of the community, not merely to reflect it. In most tasks that people confront, in other words, it is not always helpful, and may even be harmful, to be overly aware of what everyone else has thought about the matter.

To assist posterity in selecting which works and writers to enshrine and which ones to abandon? We arrive, I think, at the true underlying purpose for these parlour games – to instruct future generations as to what constitutes the best and brightest of our literature – yet attempting to do this is utterly futile. For posterity is going to find its own uses for things, including science fiction, and it isn't going to give a darn about what we think. Today, someone assembling an anthology of 19th-century American poetry won't care about the results of an 1870 survey of "The Ten Most Loved American Poems," especially when she finds that seven of the choices were written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. She will instead choose the poems that most appeal to contemporary tastes – as she should.

There is, then, a very serious game going on here, which list-makers demonstrate an awareness of: all science fiction writers wish to be remembered, but only a few will succeed, and the rest will be forgotten. To those who take the genre seriously, this is perhaps the most significant game of them all. Unfortunately, we of the present day aren't allowed to play this game, and it is pointless to pretend that we can.

So, to return to the question that started all of this: what are the ten best science fiction stories of the 20th century? It's not for us to say; that is something to be determined by future generations, not ourselves. We need to find more productive ways to spend our precious time.

Gary Westfahl

Under the Saffron Tree

Cherith Baldry

Quentin Demarest was still in the shower when the buzzer went to remind him of the morning's meeting. He shrugged into a bathrobe, and pressed the first of the day's drug ampoules against his inner arm, bracing himself for the faint, acidic bite as the drug entered his bloodstream. Though he felt no pain he imagined that the tendrils of the growth within him retracted, like a sea anemone that curls into itself only to reappear when the threat is gone.

His arm was mottled from the bruising of previous doses. He pulled on a long-sleeved shirt to hide it, finished dressing as rapidly as he could, but was still the last to slip into his seat around the table. He was conscious of the stares of the other members of the group, and muttered an apology.

Farrell, the group leader, glared at him. "Now that Dr Demarest is with us," he said with heavy sarcasm, "we can get down to business. I had a message from the Company this morning. Their ship passes through this system in five days, local time, and they're pulling us out. What they'll want to know is, what have we got for them? Where are the profit margins?"

Hidden by the edge of the conference table, Quentin's hands clenched in shock. Five days! He had never let himself think of the time when his assignment on Xatra would end and he would have to leave this lovely, haphazard world. He thought that the pain would overwhelm him, and it took all the strength he had to remain impassive and listen to the departmental reports.

"No minerals to speak of," said Crawford, the head of geology. "Some precious metals, mostly silver, but not in quantities that would interest the Company."

The biologist, Manfred, shrugged. "A few good dyestuffs. Herb tea. Damn' all, really."

Rank, in charge of technology, tapped to access the pad

in front of him. "It's a weird place," he said. "They used to have a hi-tech society. I couldn't tell you what level, not without more time to investigate, but I'd guess they were well on their way to developing star travel. And then one day – oh, about a hundred years ago – they just turned their back on it. Decided they didn't want that any more. Moved out of here, and built wooden huts out in the fields. Weird."

"They're a feckless lot," said Farrell.

"Feckless, maybe," said Dr Stendhal. "But I've never seen a healthier population."

Farrell's eyes narrowed suddenly. "What are you telling me? They live in mud huts, they've no technology more advanced than a plough or a weaving loom, and they don't get ill? What about injuries? Wounds?"

"No large predators," said Manfred.

"No enemies of any kind," Rank added. "I've seen no weapons, not even primitive ones. If they wanted to start a war, they would have to throw rocks at each other."

"It's not natural," said Manfred.

"Well, it's natural for them," Stendhal said crisply. "Perfect skin, perfect teeth, perfect muscle tone, for the best part of a long life. And they don't have doctors."

Farrell let out a long, satisfied sigh. "That's it. They don't get ill. If we can find out why, we can clean up."

As they talked, Quentin imagined once again the questing tendrils within himself. His hands clenched harder, and he concentrated on keeping his face blank. If any of those around the table thought about it, they must realize what this might mean to him. But – apart from Dr Stendhal, perhaps – they would not think about it, and Quentin would not expose himself to their pity.

"A miracle cure?" Manfred sounded sceptical. "Even if they have one, would it work for humans?"

Dr Stendhal's fingers danced across her electronic pad

as she consulted her notes. "It's possible – more than that, it's probable. Human and Xatrarian biology are very similar. We share a lot of the same genetic coding, enzymes and structural proteins. The same is true of other species in the galaxy, as if that's just the best pattern for intelligent life to develop."

"So whatever keeps the Xatrarians healthy would work for us as well?" Farrell said.

Stendhal nodded. "At the very least, it's worth investigation."

Farrell turned to Quentin. "You'll check that out with your contact."

The order was an unpleasant jolt. Quentin hesitated before he said, "I could ask Khallis, but he..."

"I get you. They'll hold out on us for the best price, right? OK, bring him up here and we'll negotiate."

"Not exactly." Quentin had no intention of trying to explain to Farrell the distaste he felt. "But it might be difficult. Xatrarians are hard to pin down."

He started as Farrell slammed a hand palm down on the table. "Damn it, Demarest, you're being paid to pin him down."

"I'm being paid to interpret, and prepare teaching programs of the Xatrarian language," Quentin said frostily.

Farrell snorted, and leant forward; Quentin could not hide from the threat in his eyes. "Now listen. If there's some miracle cure on this bloody useless planet, then I want it. The Company wants it, and they'll pay us good money for it."

"The Company!" Quentin knew he was losing control, but he could not stop the bitterness overflowing. "The Xatrarians welcomed us onto their world, and what does the Company do in exchange? Strip them of their resources, and turn them into a depot like all the other depots all over the galaxy."

He felt a shaking in his stomach as he defied Farrell. His chair scraped as he pushed it back to rise and walk out, but Crawford, sitting next to him, took his arm and pulled him back into his seat.

"Take it easy, Demarest. OK, you've got a point. But if it wasn't for the Company, you wouldn't be here. Nobody else can finance space exploration."

"Don't patronize me," Quentin said furiously.

Crawford rolled his eyes upwards and fell silent.

Farrell said, "Demarest, I want that cure. Hell, the whole universe wants it. Try asking a few people what they'd rather have, good health, or language-teaching programs. I'd have thought you'd be the first person to realize that."

Quentin said nothing; he should have known it was useless from the beginning. Farrell held him with the threatening gaze for a moment longer, and then turned back to Dr Stendhal. "Have you come up with anything?"

She shook her head. "It could be any plant or animal product on this whole world, or any combination of them. It could even be your herb tea, Manfred. It could be inherent in the physical makeup of the Xatrarians, but I've examined some of them and if it is there, it's well hidden. I'm sorry, Farrell, but I can't help. Not without a lot more time and resources."

"That's no good. We've got to have it now, if we expect the Company to pay us for it. It all comes back to you, Demarest." Farrell sounded disgusted. "You're the only one of us who can talk to them. You'll have to ask your contact, and make sure he answers."

"Try taking him to bed," Manfred suggested, grinning. "You know, pillow talk."

Quentin stiffened. "Khallis is male."

Manfred laughed. "Demarest, what planet are you on? He – she, it – isn't male, isn't female, isn't anything. They don't do sex like us."

"They do it, though," Rank said with a snigger. "And how!"

He exchanged a glance with Manfred, and in the midst of searing embarrassment Quentin realized they were talking from personal experience. Though none of the others had bothered to learn more than a few words of Xatrarian, Quentin imagined they had other ways of making their desires known, and the Xatrarians were accommodating.

They were both grinning now. Manfred said, "Loosen up, Demarest. Have a little fun."

The tones were coarse, but the words were very much the same as what Khallis had said to him, two days ago, in the sweet, overgrown garden near the crumbling outer wall of the city. "Relax, Quentin. Life is to be enjoyed."

The Xatrarian sense of time was erratic, and they had no concept of a fixed rendezvous, but while Quentin had been working with Khallis they had fallen into the habit of meeting in the garden.

Quentin was sitting with his back against the trunk of a tree that shed saffron-coloured petals onto the carpet of shaggy moss below. Khallis, stretched out on the moss beside him, inquired politely, "Quentin, would you like us to lie together?"

The sexual vocabulary of Xatrarian had not formed part of Quentin's studies, and it took him a moment to work out what Khallis meant. "What, here?"

The Xatrarian gave him a languid smile. His green-gold eyes were slitted like a cat's. "If you want. Or I know somewhere we could go."

His lithe body was outlined under a thin linen robe. Fine golden hairs shone on his golden skin, so that he seemed to be covered by a silky pelt. His hair was a fleece of curls, paler than his skin. Quentin thought he was very beautiful; he found his heart pounding uncomfortably, and when Khallis reached out to him he flinched away from the touch.

Khallis sounded mildly concerned. "Quentin, have I upset you?"

"No." His breath was coming unevenly. "Only, among my people – some of my people," he corrected himself conscientiously, "there is a taboo against... lying together with a person of one's own gender."

Khallis looked puzzled, and then burst into laughter. "But Quentin, you know I am not! We have no male and female –" he used the Galactic words, for there was no equivalent in Xatrarian – "so there can be no taboo." His laughter died, faded to a gentle smile. "Relax, Quentin."

Life is to be enjoyed.”

Quentin sat hugging his knees. He wanted to say, Not for me, as he thought of the growth that clutched within him, the pain and the miserable vomiting. But he had not told any of that to Khallis, and he would not start now. He could not bear the thought of the alien’s pity. He began, “Khallis, forgive me, I –”

“I see,” Khallis said regretfully. “You do not find me desirable.”

“No!” Quentin responded instinctively, and flushed at the glint of amusement he saw in Khallis’s eyes. “I mean – Khallis, it’s not...”

He stumbled into silence, furious with his own ineptitude. And what does Khallis see in me? he wondered. Maybe this is just Xatrarian politeness, some social custom that I haven’t mastered. He can’t... want me. He shrank from the word love, even in his own mind.

Fluidly, too swiftly for Quentin to avoid him, Khallis came close and raised a hand to the side of his face, fingers plunged deep into his hair. Quentin stiffened.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Khallis. “I will do nothing you do not wish.” As if he had been reading Quentin’s thoughts, he went on, “You are so different. So... fragile. And your hair so dark. I find that exciting.” His voice grew warm. “And you are not like your own people, either. They have come to this world for what they can take. But you have asked nothing. Quentin, I would give you joy.”

Quentin felt that if he tried to speak he would weep and disgrace himself utterly. Khallis sighed, and let his hand fall. “But not like this,” he said.

Quentin bent his head over his knees so that he did not have to look at the alien. Indistinctly, he said, “No, not like this.”

He heard Khallis get up. A little later, when he dared to raise his head, the Xatrarian was gone. Exhausted, Quentin struggled to his feet and dragged himself back to the complex. He had never in his life – not even when the doctors had diagnosed his cancer – felt so completely hopeless.

He had made himself think of Khallis as male, partly because of the alien’s greater strength and his careless dominance, partly, he recognized, because another male would be just a work colleague, and there would be no danger of physical attraction between them. Now he recognized that he had deliberately raised the barrier, knowing it was meaningless, to hide even from himself that he had loved Khallis from the moment of their first meeting.

He spent a sleepless night, recalling every detail of their encounter in such graphic detail that he almost wept for embarrassment. He still did not know what to say to Khallis when he went down to the garden the next morning.

But that day – the day before the meeting – though Quentin waited for a long time, Khallis did not come.

Quentin had begun to work with Khallis almost six months before, when the expedition had first come to Xatra. He had never known whether Khallis had chosen to represent his people, or whether he was obeying

orders. Perhaps on Xatra the distinction had no meaning. The Xatrarians seemed to govern by a system of loose consensus, which infuriated Farrell, who liked to go to the top and could not adjust to a world where there was no top to go to.

At first they worked in Quentin’s rooms in the central complex of the old city. The whole of the inner city had once been some kind of administrative centre, abandoned by the Xatrarians at the same time, Quentin assumed, as they had turned their backs on their technology.

But after a while Khallis became bored, and perhaps uneasy behind stone walls, and he led Quentin outside. From then on, Quentin carried a small recorder, and developed his vocabulary just as effectively among the lanes of the outer city. Although few Xatrarians lived there, they still came to meet and gossip and bargain. The streets were a jumble of market stalls, teahouses, music rooms and gardens.

Quentin followed where Khallis led him, dizzy with the colours and scents and sounds of a new world. When he left the complex it was as if he shrugged off an old, dirty coat, and could step at least for a little while into the sun. He began to learn delight.

And as they walked, they talked. Khallis maintained a tactful refusal to press Quentin about himself and his world, but he was eager to tell about his own. Quentin drank in his words, his laughter, refusing to let himself think about the time when the work would be completed and the expedition would leave.

“No,” said Quentin.

“What do you mean, no?” Farrell sounded furious.

“I won’t help you to exploit these people.” He could not forget what Khallis had said to him, under the saffron tree. You are not like your own people... you have asked nothing. He could not face Khallis again with a demand, destroying all that the alien had seen in him to admire. Khallis would believe he was just like the rest; he *would* be just like the rest. Or worse still, Khallis might think that he was offering himself as the price for the cure.

“You’ll do as you’re damn well told,” said Farrell.

“No.” Quentin had to gasp for breath, as if suddenly the room was emptied of air. He wasn’t sure what Farrell or the Company could do to him, but if they made him leave Xatra he did not care.

He was not ready for what Farrell said. “Demarest, I’m authorizing no more of that drug of yours until I have some answers.” Dr Stendhal started to speak, and subsided as Farrell glared at her. “On the other hand –” his voice became acid-sweet “– find us the miracle cure, and you can have it first. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Demarest?”

Quentin fought with terror and hope, bitterly ashamed of his own cowardice. “Khallis – Khallis may not tell me,” he said.

“I think he will. In fact, Demarest, I’ll make it real easy for you. All you’ll need to do is interpret. They don’t get ill, they don’t fight, they don’t get used to pain. Just bring him in here,” said Farrell. “He’ll soon tell us what we need to know.”

Quentin went back to his room and activated his computer. He called up the files that had taken so much work, the elegant paradigms that would have formed the basis of teaching programs in Xatrarian. Regretfully, he scrolled through them one last time, and then deleted everything.

He rolled up his sleeve, pressed what would be the last ampoule of the drug against his inner arm, and went out.

If the Xatrarian cure existed, the Company would never offer it to everyone. They would dole it out, drop by precious drop, to those who could afford to pay. Quentin doubted that they would give it to him, unless perhaps as a guinea pig. And knowing that, his decision was easy. He was going to die, and he preferred to do it here, on the world he had come to love.

As he left the central complex, Quentin found himself turning in the direction of the garden. Hardly likely, he thought, that Khallis would be there, after that last, disastrous encounter, but he did not know where else to start.

The white sun was rising to its zenith. Quentin had forgotten his dark glasses, and felt the first niggling of a headache as he hurried down the shallow steps towards the inner wall.

The garden lay at the foot of a flight of crumbling steps. A white flower, highly scented like jasmine, trailed over the arch at the entrance; Quentin had to brush aside the curtain of blossom as he stepped onto the grass.

Khallis sat with his back to him, his arms stretched out behind him, his face upturned to the blossoms of the saffron tree. Quentin felt a jolt in the depths of his stomach; he was not sure if it was relief or fear. He took a step forward. "Khallis?" His voice sounded hoarse; he cleared his throat and tried again. "Khallis, I –"

The alien turned his head, the golden cat-eyes wide. His hair swung in a heavy curtain. He smiled. "Quentin." "Khallis, I'm sorry. I must talk to you. Please."

"Of course." Khallis rose lithely to his feet, and put a hand under Quentin's elbow. "Let's walk."

He steered Quentin along a winding path to another gateway that led into the outer city. All was quiet. Sharp black shadows lay on the worn flagstones. Quentin tried to walk in the shade to ease his aching eyes. In one dark corner he stumbled at a flutter of wings around his head as he disturbed a colony of moths clinging to the cool stones of the wall; he felt Khallis's hand on his arm, steadying him.

Quentin drew away from him and leant briefly against the wall as the huge sandcoloured moths whirled around him and settled in their refuge once again. He was conscious of the weight of stone all around him, the narrow streets, the oppressiveness of so much ruined grandeur.

"You left all this," he said. "Your people..."

"Found other ways to live," Khallis gazed down into Quentin's face, his green-gold eyes compelling. "Walls protect, but they imprison too."

In the outer city the market stalls had been set up. Cloth dyed ochre and saffron and indigo. Spices heaped in brass bowls, the sharp scent catching Quentin in the throat as he and Khallis wandered by. A silver worker's stall, with jewellery displayed on a wooden trellis.

For want of something to do, Quentin picked up a ring,

a heavy piece of silver and lapis, and turned it in his fingers.

"Do you like it?" Khallis said. "Will you let me give it to you?"

Quentin felt hot with embarrassment. Quickly he returned the ring to its place. "No," he said, and then, fearful of giving offence, he added, "It is our custom for... for lovers to exchange rings."

Khallis's cat eyes were slitted against the light; a faint smile touched his mouth. He was quite impenetrable. With a scarcely perceptible shrug under the fluid lines of his robe he turned and moved on, and Quentin followed him.

At the next corner a stall-holder gave them squares of some dense sweetmeat, scattered with spicy seeds. Quentin bought a packet of the stuff, though he knew he would never eat it, and he had no one who would want it as a gift.

Pain was flaring behind his eyes. Something inside his head was beating out, *The last time...* He could not find words to speak to Khallis.

In the square before the main gate Khallis halted and put a hand on Quentin's shoulder. "Something troubles you."

Quentin raised his eyes to a face as terribly beautiful as an angel from an ancient ikon. He wanted to speak and knew if he tried he would break down utterly, there in the most public place in the entire city.

Gently, Khallis said, "Come."

He steered Quentin to a table of greyish lyrwood outside a teahouse, and the proprietor brought glasses of herb tea. Quentin sat in a fog of misery while the fragrant steam curled around him. Under an awning by the teahouse door a Xatrarian musician played a silver-stringed bryal.

Khallis laid a hand over Quentin's. "Tell me."

Quentin was acutely conscious of the silken touch. "The Company –" he began.

Where the main street met the square a market stall crashed over. A security guard was struggling in billowing folds of striped cloth. A second man almost fell over him, recovered, and raised his needle gun.

Quentin let out a faint whimper of terror. Of course they had watched him. They must have found that he had deleted the files. Perhaps they realized that he was not going to bring Khallis into the complex. He had delayed his confession, and now it was too late.

Sinewy fingers fastened round his wrist. Khallis said, "In here." He dragged Quentin to his feet and pulled him under the awning into the teahouse.

Inside was a long room that stretched back into shadows. Khallis hurried Quentin down the length of it and through a reed curtain at the far end. They came out into a courtyard. A young Xatrarian at the well gave them a startled glance as Khallis ducked under a line of washing and pushed open a door in the wall beyond.

They stood in an alley running alongside the outer wall of the city. Quentin could still hear faint sounds of crashing from inside the teahouse. He gasped out, "Go – they'll never find you."

Khallis paused, hands lightly circling Quentin's wrists. "Is that what you want? Your own people? Or do you

want to come with me?"

Quentin tried to pull away from him, but the grip was inexorable. There was no time – and yet he did not need time. He had made his decision and only Khallis's danger had made him question it. He said, "With you."

Khallis laughed. He spun Quentin round and pushed him ahead down the alley until they reached a place where the wall had crumbled. Desperate for speed now, Quentin scrambled over the loose stones. Beyond was a stretch of open ground, grasses burnt by the brilliant sun, sloping down to the river.

Pausing, a hand on Quentin's shoulder, Khallis pointed. Across the river, half hidden by the shrubs that clustered along both banks, was a group of low, sunlit buildings.

"My village," said Khallis. "We'll be safe there."

"They'll find us –"

"But they never cross the river. They won't know where to look. Hurry."

They ran across the open ground into the shelter of the bushes. Upstream, a bridge crossed the river, carrying the road up to the main city gate. A security guard, gun in hand, was leaning against the parapet.

"Quentin, can you swim?" asked Khallis.

"Not – not well."

"I'll help you. Quickly."

Nervously Quentin pulled off his shoes and waded out into the surge. Sunlight glittered on the surface, dazzling his eyes. He cried out in alarm as the bottom shelved abruptly, and the current took him before he was aware. Floundering awkwardly to stay afloat he struck out for where he thought the opposite bank must be, though it was hidden from him now in a kaleidoscope of after-images from the brightness of the water.

Khallis's voice came from close by him. "Don't panic. I'm here."

All Quentin's instincts were to clutch at him, but his fear of disgracing himself in Khallis's eyes outweighed his fear of drowning. He made himself keep on, half blinded and struggling, aware of nothing in the end but the smothering water and Khallis's guiding voice.

His strength was ebbing, but as he thought he must slip beneath the surface he found himself out of the force of the current, treading water in a scooped-out hollow under the bank. The fierce light had faded to gold, filtered through overhanging branches.

Then he felt solid ground under his feet, and Khallis was dragging him into the safety of the trees.

By the time they reached the village, Khallis was all but carrying him. Quentin had a confused impression of houses woven from strips of supple wood, ranged around a central compound with a well in the middle. Khallis guided him into one of the houses and straight through to a verandah at the back, shaded from the sun by a reed awning. A saffron tree, like the one in the garden, grew at the foot of the verandah steps and scattered its flowers over them.

Khallis helped Quentin to strip off his wet clothes and let him sink down onto a mattress laid on the dusty floorboards. Quentin crouched there, hating his own naked-

ness, knowing himself ugly. Khallis stood looking down at him. After a moment he said, "Enough." He undid the shoulder fastening of his robe, and let it slip to the floor.

Quentin turned his head aside, terrified at the thought of the alien so close, and naked as he was. Khallis knelt on the mattress beside him, and took him by the shoulders. "Oh, please..." Quentin whispered.

"Don't be afraid." The alien's voice was caressing. "I won't hurt you." Quentin felt the long, silken body pressing against him, and a pulse of laughter running through it. "Quentin, if you really don't want this, then say so, before it's too late."

In a chaos of fear and desire, Quentin turned to him, and had to close his eyes against the blaze of tenderness and passion in Khallis's face, before he could reach at last into his embrace.

Then he was struggling again in the surge and dazzle of the river, and this time it swept him inexorably away and drowned him.

Quentin slept; when he woke it was twilight. He still lay on the verandah, looking across to the pale gleam of the river. Someone – Khallis, he supposed – had wrapped a quilt around him. The awning whispered in a breeze that bent the grasses and brought a faint aromatic scent. Quentin buried his face in the pillow and shivered in the memory of terror and delight.

The sound of the door roused him; Khallis had come onto the verandah; he wore a silky striped robe, and he was carrying a tray. He set it down beside Quentin and handed him a glass of herb tea. Taking the second glass himself, he sat on the edge of the verandah, swinging one foot. He said, "Some of your people stood on the bridge for a while and talked. Then they went away."

Quentin lay propped on one elbow, staring down into his glass, inhaling the aromatic steam. "Khallis," he said, "I must tell you the truth."

Khallis turned to look at him, amusement lighting in his eyes. "Well, if you must..."

"They sent me to bring you to the complex. They would have tortured you."

Khallis sipped his tea. All amusement was gone; his eyes were slitted. "Why?"

"They want to know why it is that you – your people – are never ill. They're leaving in a few days, and they need something valuable to sell to the Company. They..." A writhing despair clutched around him, and it was a moment before he could go on. Khallis waited, impenetrable. "I have a... a disease. Something that can't be cured, but I had drugs to control it. They – they would have taken my drugs away. They promised... they said if I found the secret, I would be the first to try it."

Khallis cocked a brow. "Did you believe them?"

"No."

Khallis put aside his tea, took Quentin's untouched glass from him before it spilt, and laid a hand over his. "Don't weep, love. You're with me now."

Love? He called me... Quentin fought to speak coherently. "Khallis, you don't understand. I'm dying. It will be painful, and... and I'll be repulsive. You won't want –"

He broke off at Khallis's soft laughter. The alien was looking down at him, the green-gold eyes gleaming.

"Quentin, haven't you guessed? The secret they wanted lives within us."

Quentin was no scientist, and it was a moment before he understood. Khallis must be talking about a virus; that would make sense. But he still did not understand the almost indecent look of triumph on the alien's face. "Khallis –"

"It began..." Khallis spoke at the same time, and shrugged. "Who knows how, or how long ago? When I was a child, I remember my grandfather told me tales of how his father was crippled by disease. But then the healing came and passed among us." He drew Quentin into his arms. "I passed it on to you this afternoon."

Quentin stared at him. "This afternoon? When... is that why you did it?" Bitterness flooded over him at what he thought Khallis was telling him. "Out of pity?"

"Pity?" The alien's long mouth curled into a smile. "But how was I to know, when you have only just told me? Do I need to show you whether what I feel is pity?"

His embrace tightened, became suddenly demanding. Panicky, Quentin fended him off, and though he was nowhere near strong enough to free himself the alien relaxed his hold, and sat beside him with his hands lightly on his shoulders.

"Khallis, it can't be," Quentin said. "We're different – your healing won't work for me." Even as he was speaking, he remembered what Dr Stendhal had said, that he had barely understood at the time, of how close the Xatrarians and humans were in their biology. His mind reeled under the pressure of hope.

"It's already working," Khallis said. "Look." He turned Quentin's hand palm-upward, exposing the inner arm. The ugly bruising from the drug ampoules had faded, was already barely visible. Khallis raised the hand and pressed his lips to Quentin's wrist, his eyes dancing. "Truly, love, it's over. There's nothing to worry about now."

He gathered Quentin into his arms again and held him as his tears spilled over and he wept out his terror and despair.

By the time he was quiet again, it was full night. The two moons glowed pale above the river. Khallis lit a lamp and hung it on the verandah; huge night moths fluttered around it, making dark wings waver across Quentin where he was curled up, exhausted. Khallis lay down beside him, wrapping the quilt around both of them.

"In a few days," he said, "when you've had time to think about it, you'll need to find work you can do. You might start by teaching some more of us your language. If your people come back, we'll have to negotiate with them."

At first Quentin could not answer, bewildered by the prospect of a future, here on Xatra. He did not dare to imagine happiness. He said, "Khallis, I thought I was dying. I thought it would all be over in a few days. Now... if you don't want me to stay, I shall understand."

A faint frown settled on the perfect face. "Quentin? We can find you another house, or help you build one. But I thought you wanted to be with me."

His sudden uncertainty took Quentin by the throat like tears. He had never imagined that Khallis could be hurt, or not by him. He pressed his face into Khallis's shoulder. "I love you," he breathed out. "Oh, Khallis, I love you."

Soon Khallis slept, his supple body stretched beside Quentin, his breathing light and regular. Quentin lay awake, looking out over the river to the dark bulk of the city against the sky. One of the moons was setting behind the walls of the complex.

Three generations, or thereabouts, since the virus had swept through the Xatrarians. About a hundred years. A hundred years since they had abandoned their technology. Quentin struggled with the little science that he knew, to make sense of it all.

A virus has to feed and reproduce. Suppose that somehow it could feed on chemicals in the brain, the chemicals that caused aggression, the urge to compete or to hurt. That would explain the Xatrarians' relaxed approach to life, and why they did not go to war. It would explain why Farrell had called them a feckless lot.

More than anything, it explained Khallis's patience, and why he had waited until Quentin dared to give him what he could so easily have taken.

Quentin made a small movement towards the edge of the mattress; Khallis half roused, threw an arm across him and drew him closer. He lay still until Khallis had settled again, knowing that there was no going back, even if he chose, even if his own people would not shoot him on sight as a traitor.

Manfred and Rank must be carrying the virus. For a moment Quentin tensed with fear at the thought of what would happen to this gentle world if they ever discovered it. Then he relaxed. Except for the cure, there was nothing here to attract the Company. The group would pull out within days and when they returned to Earth they would be split up and sent on other assignments. By the time anyone realized what was happening – if they ever did – the virus would have taken hold on widely distant worlds, and there would be no hope of tracing it back to Xatra.

Quentin supposed he was responsible. If he had given his love to Khallis at first the virus would have shown up as it healed him while he was still working in the complex. Or he could have obeyed orders, however hateful. But his desperate fumbling for truth had obscured the truth, and nothing would ever be the same.

He did not feel that he could greatly care.

He lay in the arms of his alien lover, under the saffron tree, and listened to the rustling of the night wind in the branches, the faint ripple of peace spreading across the universe.

Cherith Baldry is the author of several young-adult sf and fantasy books, and has contributed short stories to the recent series of anthologies edited by Mike Ashley. She lives in Surrey, and the above is her first story for *Interzone*.



REVIEWED

Head Space

Paul McAuley

The future never lives up to the promises of the past. We're pretty certain that we did not get the 2001 we deserve, and we certainly did not get the 2001 envisioned by Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, with its city-sized space station, a moon base as elaborate as a James Bond set, and expeditions to Jupiter. The long making of the movie was contiguous with the burgeoning of the Apollo programme, and even before Armstrong's historic First Step, there were signs that, as far as the tax-paying American public was concerned, the idea of space exploration was passé. The movie was released in 1968 to what was at first general indifference and poor reviews, and it was only later that audiences grew, not because of the balletic space scenes or the transcendental theme, but because of word-of-mouth about the synergy between the effects of hallucinogens and the kinetic lightshow of the final scenes. The ultimate trip was to be found not in outer space, but in inner.

Outer space is an increasingly hard sell, even in hard sf: there's a trend in novels about near-future space exploration to portray with gritty realism compromised expeditions scavenging the bones of old dreams, or to set the action in a more favourable alternate history. And so here, with two near-future novels: one rewiring history and dragging in aliens to give the space race a boost; the other using public indifference as a springboard for its plot.

Like *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Cosmonaut Keep* (Little Brown, £16.99), the first volume in Ken MacLeod's "Engines of Light" sequence, blends first contact with revelations about

alien interference with human history and evolution. But while the collaboration between Clarke and Kubrick was concerned with cosmological destiny, the aspirations of MacLeod's characters are determinedly pragmatic.

In one strand of the plot, Matt Cairns, a software project manager in independent socialist Scotland, becomes involved in the discovery of aliens living in the asteroid belt when plans for what appears to be an anti-gravity space drive fall into his hands. In the other strand, set a few hundred years later on the planet Mingulay, which is inhabited by giant seawdelling krakens, the enigmatic reptilian saurs, and last (and certainly least) humans, Gregor Cairns, a marine biologist and a descendant of

the crew of the starship the *Bright Star*, is reluctantly drawn into the search for the lost secrets of the *Bright Star*'s workings. It doesn't give much away to reveal that Gregor is a descendant of Matt, and as the two strands are gradually knitted together, a complex history of intelligence in the Universe is revealed. God-like aliens "swarming by the trillion, a regular Oort crowd of them around every star" preside over a vast and complex interstellar society, including two overlapping spheres settled long ago by the krakens, saurs and humans descended from ancient lost tribes taken from Earth. Matt's story stirs contemporary humans into the mix; Gregor's will give humans independence from the trade network of starships that rely upon kraken navigators.

As in his previous sequence of novels, MacLeod cannily provides a continuance between the familiar and the far future, although because the necessary space hardware is unlikely in our own near future, that of *Cosmonaut Keep* appears to be a lightly tweaked alternate history in which communist Russia has taken over Europe and cosmonauts have begun to mine the asteroids. This near-contemporary strand is, though, the weaker of the two. The attribute which marks Matt Cairns as a hero is that he can work up solutions for running antediluvian and incompatible computer software systems; what little tension his story has turns on interminable CAD-CAM manipulations of enigmatic plans for the stardrive that seem to me to be resolved by that good old pulp doublespeak standby of reversing the polarity.

Those more geekish than this reviewer may find some consolatory power fantasies in all this, and there's no doubt that MacLeod knows at least as much about computers and computing as he does about Far-Left micropolitics, but the rest of us will find more to enjoy in the story set on Mingulay. MacLeod reveals the complex back history of his set-up with admirable economy, and provides plenty of eyekicks and some wonderful setpieces, from the arrival of a gigantic starship to herding of dinosaurs by flying saucers. Ending with a slingshot towards what might be a good old-fashioned interstellar war, *Cosmonaut Keep* is a portal to a deeply imagined future history that parleys *X-Files* paranoia about Area 51 and alien Greys into a vast interstellar community watched over by microcosmic gods.

Geoffrey A. Landis's *Mars Crossing* (Tor, \$24.95) is a promising late entry in the second wave of recent novels about Mars – Landis bristles with the science-fictional equivalent of the Right Stuff, for he has not only won both the Hugo and Nebula



Awards for his short fiction, but was also involved in the design of experiments carried but the Mars Pathfinder mission. It's disappointing to report, therefore, that *Mars Crossing* is more a damp squib than a Saturn 5.

The plot is a straightforward story of disaster and triumph over adversity crossed with a murder mystery. The third expedition to Mars, following a stripped-down Brazilian venture in which two astronauts were landed at Mars's north pole but mysteriously died, and a large-scale American mission which blew up on the return journey, is soon in trouble when the fuel for its return journey is lost. When the members of the expedition set off on a gruelling trek halfway across Mars to reach the Brazilian capsule, which can carry only two of them back to Earth, it quickly becomes clear that one of their number is adjusting the odds of survival by murdering the others.

It's a neat set-up. There are some nice riffs on the compromises forced upon the expedition by a threadbare space programme, not least that one of the astronauts, winner of the lottery that helped sponsor the expedition, is a teenage boy whose callow inexperience ironically threatens everyone around him, and who harbours a Dark Secret to boot, and Landis devotes a good deal of his novel to the veracity of both the hardships endured by his astronauts in Mars's unforgiving environment and of the hardware they deploy. But this painstaking mimesis does not extend to the astronauts themselves – the only attempt at characterization is contained in clunky flashbacks full of frankly silly melodrama and the plot, which at bottom is a variant of Tom Godwin's hard-sf story "The Cold Equations," turns on the fact that we're supposed to believe

that two astronauts could survive a return journey lasting more than a year in a capsule smaller than the Apollo command module. Despite some evocative descriptions of Martian scenery and a plethora of authentic hardware, *Mars Crossing* retreads far too much of the same ground as its hard-sf predecessors, including a resoundingly clunky scene in which fossil Martian life is found for the first time, and lacks both the psychological tension and plot twists to make a convincing hi-tech thriller.

As its title suggests, the central theme of Howard V. Hendrix's third novel, *Better Angels* (Ace, \$13.95) is transcendence, but despite some mystical aliens, it's concerned with inner rather than outer space. Its intricate metaphysical soap opera, encompassing 30 years of turbulent history, blending human/machine interfaces, nanotechnology, New Age mysticism, virtual reality, quantum mechanics, shamanism and alien meddling in human evolution, *Better Angels* is nothing less than an attempt to render a comprehensive synthesis that's the equivalent of a Theory of Everything for the human condition, crammed with vivid wordplay and freewheeling speculation on secret histories and connections between cutting-edge physics and fuzzy mysticism:

The singularity – which the dancing and drumming and mushroom-drug dreaming had unleashed – came and took her. Down into the quantum flux, down into dimensions smaller than the Planck length, energies higher than Planck energies, velocities independent of the speed of light. Phrases – holographic plenum, holographic reality, implicate order, frequency domain, high dimensionality, entelechial level, noumenal system, spiritual realm – all fitted through her mind faster than she could understand them and were gone.

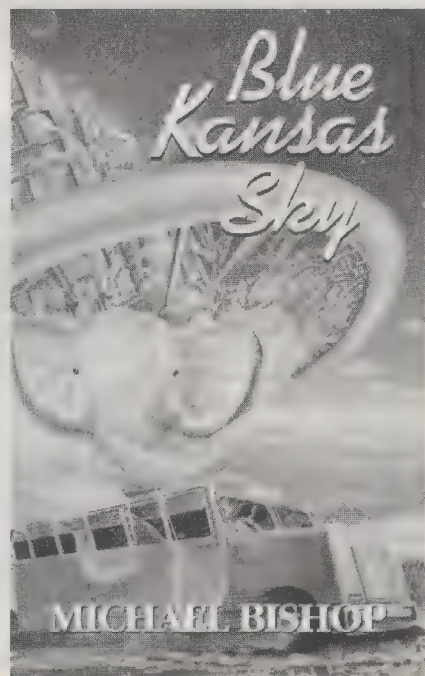
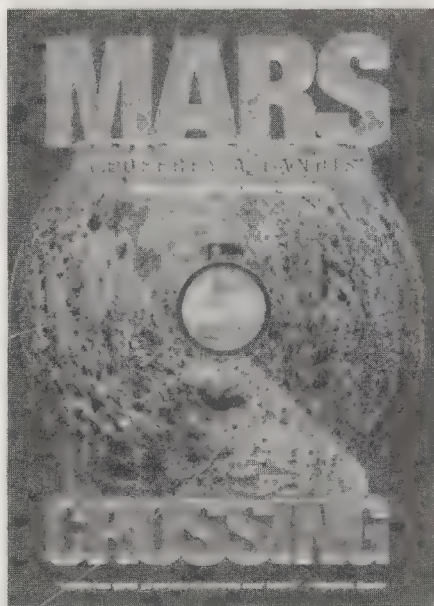
And there's the problem. The density of information is impressive – every page reads like flashbulbs exploding in a cave full of bats – but the promiscuous crossbreeding of theories fails to produce much coherence, and the contrived synthesis of human transcendence and a crisis in the Universe's information sphere, resolved through a reworked version of the Grendel myth and the Campbellian (John W. not Joseph) pathetic fallacy that the human race possesses some unique but universally vital quality, doesn't convince.

Blue Kansas Sky (Golden Gryphon Press, \$24.95, with an incisive introduction by James Morrow) collects four novellas by Michael Bishop that span most of this under-regarded writer's career. Bishop's fiction is done

in close-up rather than splashy widescreen, focusing on personal predicaments that reflect larger concerns, infusing fundamental sf tropes with a strong and highly literate humanistic sensibility. Although set in wildly disparate places – a mid-20th-century Mid-western small town; apartheid South Africa; a colony starship; an alien planet – all four demonstrate an enviable ability to inhabit very different skins.

Of the two stories most strongly identified with conventional sf, the earliest piece, "Death and Designation Among the Asadai" (later expanded into Bishop's second novel, *Transfigurations*), is the stronger. The story of an anthropologist struggling to prove that an apparently primitive alien race is in fact the remnant of a highly technological society deploys the "soft" science of ethnography with the scrupulous rigour of the best hard sf, yet the close of the story is notable for its refusal to opt for easy explanations for the behaviour of either the aliens of the anthropologist. In "Cri de Coeur," set on a colony starship nearing its destination, there's an affecting portrait of a father struggling to raise his Down's Syndrome son, but the contrast of the warm human world and the inhuman stochastic cosmos is a little too neat, and the prejudiced villain, too quickly converted, doesn't convince; Bishop's villains are stronger for being off-stage, as with the anthropologist's rival in "Death and Designation Among the Asadai."

There are no easy lessons, though, in either "Apartheid, Superstrings and Mordecai Thurbana" or the coming-of-age story which lends the collection its title. The former is a tough-minded parable in which a middle-class white man who has been rendered invisible to



his own kind becomes a witness to the human cost of apartheid South Africa. By turns funny and excoriating, the story brilliantly sustains its central conceit of tangling personal politics with the search by physicists for a Theory of Everything, and dissects the absurdity and human cost of apartheid with chilling effect.

The eponymous "Blue Kansas Sky," previously unpublished, brilliantly evokes its rural Mid-western setting, intertwining the coming-of-age of young Sonny Peacock with the story of how an ex-convict, Sonny's uncle, Rory, makes himself a place in his community. Only Sonny sees his uncle – sees his human worth – with a clear unprejudiced eye, and Rory repays this with a crucial moment of trust at a turning point in Sonny's life. This limpid and unsentimental story, with its moving epiphanal gracenote, unfolds without recourse to any fantasy (except, possibly, a single moment of flight), yet characterizes Bishop's inclusive impulse, his unjudgmental exposition of human weaknesses, and his celebration of human strengths.

In his book about *The Basement Tapes*, the private recordings Bob Dylan and the Band made in 1967, after the outraged reaction to their electrified tour of the previous year, Greil Marcus hit upon an enduring metaphor for the mysterious gothic dramas depicted in American folk music. They came, Marcus wrote, from the Invisible Republic, a place of unwritten traditions and enduring but infinitely malleable tragedies, a place, like its music, "both transparent and inexplicable," a place invoked not only by the folk revival which many felt Dylan and the Band had betrayed, but from the civil rights movement, "a kingdom where suffering and injustice, freedom and right, were coin of the realm."

That's the precisely place invoked by the stories collected in *Beluthahatchie and Other Stories* (Golden Gryphon, \$23.95, with an introduction by Michael Bishop, and an afterword by John Kessel), the first collection (and first book) by Andy Duncan, a new writer who, like Dylan, gathers up traditional materials and twists them into something new. For Duncan is one of those rare writers who arrives with his voice fully formed: every one of these eleven stories is indelibly permeated by it.

Like Howard Waldrop, an admitted

influence, Duncan mines the half-forgotten interstices of history for his material with a magpie's eye for the telling detail, although with one exception Duncan's stories are not alternate histories but deeply felt evocations of lost or half-forgotten times and places and incidents. A good half are set in Duncan's native South: "Beluthahatchie," in which a blues singer tweaks the Devil's tail in a suburb of Hell; "Lincoln in Frogmore," inspired by a naive painting of a mythical Civil War incident; "The Executioner's Guild," about an itinerant executioner who can hear the thoughts of the condemned; the depression-era story of a singer too pure to be recorded in "Liza and the Crazy Water Man." In these stories, in "The Map of the Homes to the Stars," a lovely, lonely tale of regret, and in "Fortitude," the sympathetic invocation of General George Patton's derangement, involving futile attempts to change history in a life lived twice over, Duncan writes straight from the heart of the Invisible Republic (I'd like to think that the Model-A Ford in which the narrator of "Liza and the Crazy Water Man" rode with his fellow musicians "a hundred miles of dirt roads and mud tracks to get to some crossroads in the middle of nowhere" was the same Model-A Kentucky musician Dock Boggs, one of the subjects of Greil Marcus's *The Invisible Republic*, recalled riding over a mountain to make some money in the neighbouring town).

Duncan is equally impressive in his depiction of the first (silent) movie about the *Titanic* disaster in "Saved," the trial of the corpse of a medieval Pope in "From Alfano's Reliquary," the multi-stranded intrigue in a 1920s Parisian theatre in "Grand Guignol," and the twist-in-the-tale homage to Poe in "The Premature Burials." His absolute and precise assumption of voice is more important in his stories than the fantasy tropes concealed in their grain. The pleasure to be had, and it is deep and abiding, is not the neat twist or the unexpected resolution (most of the stories, told in recollection by narrators at the edge of events, are virtually without plot), but to hear these citizens of the Invisible Republic speak clearly and truly about lost histories and forgotten places in voices as endearingly American as Bob Dylan or Dock Boggs or Huckleberry Finn.

Paul McAuley



Planet Disappointment

Tom Arden

Explorers used to think there was an inland sea in the middle of Australia. Accordingly, many a band of hardy chaps set off in search of it, convinced that the desert would give way in the end to lush green wetlands. One such party, finding only an enormous salt lake, dubbed the offending feature "Lake Disappointment."

Mars might just as aptly be named "Planet Disappointment." After canals, Wells, Welles, Barsoom and *The Martian Chronicles*, it's hard to get excited about the occasional lump of rock – unless, of course, you're a real science nerd. As one of them notes in Paul McAuley's new novel *The Secret of Life* (Voyager, £16.99), "Our expectations of Martians have much dwindled. At the beginning of the century we hoped for ancient civilizations. As we learned more and more about Mars, we settled for humble lichens, and then could only hope for a few hardy bacteria."

Like the light barrier and other inconvenient facts, this makes things hard for science-fiction writers. Some, from Frederik Pohl in *Man Plus* to Kim Stanley Robinson in the *Mars* trilogy, have found a rich field in the subject of humans going to the red, dead planet, and the dramas of colonization. Paul McAuley has been there too, in *Red Dust*, which depicts a Mars settled by Chinese communists. Like much of McAuley's work, *Red Dust* is sf with a fantastical edge.

The Secret of Life is very different. The commies are back, but this is sf firmly grounded in possibility. Cast as a near-future technothriller, it is a tale of scientific skulduggery in which the Chinese have found ancient bacte-

ria underneath the Martian North Pole. Naturally they try to keep it secret, especially since the "Chi" (as the stuff is called) contains biological secrets which could massively speed up genetic engineering. The commercial prospects are huge, but so are the dangers, especially after a bungled attempt at industrial espionage results in a vial of the said substance getting lobbed into the Pacific.

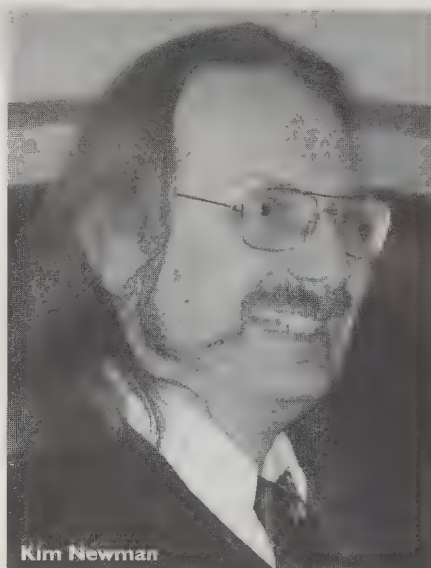
Before we know it, a sort of DNA oil-slick is replicating out of control. Cue heroine Mariella Anders, brilliant biochemist, who soon finds herself on an US-backed mission to Mars to track down the source of the Chi, and find out how to stop it. Ranged against her are not only the Chinese but the expedition's leader Penn Brown and his ruthless paymasters at the bio-multi-national Cytex, determined that no one else should get a look-in when it comes to profiting from "the secret of life."

This is a highly readable novel which hits a great many contemporary targets, from the riddles of DNA to the commercial corruption of science. In publishing terms, the book – McAuley's first for Voyager, aka HarperCollins – appears to be an attempt to reposition his career, shifting him out of the sf ghetto into the more lucrative "thriller" market. The experiment is not entirely a happy one. There is something too self-conscious about this book, as if the author can never forget the hovering shadows of movie rights and projected American sales.

There is a certain element of sucking-up to the Yanks. Again and again we are told of the superiority of the US in every area of endeavour – except (ha ha) in the making of tea. Europe, in McAuley's near-future, is a heritage theme park, while the Chinese, substituted for the Ruskies of old, are hardly much more than cartoon villains who sneer about democracy at every chance they get.

There are other forms of caricature. The heroine, Mariella (one imagines her as a role for Sigourney Weaver) is essentially a man's idea of a feminist role model, relentlessly brilliant, competent, heroic, and never prey to a moment's self-doubt. She's a little wearing, as is her arch-enemy Penn Brown, a sort of melodrama sexist pig with no redeeming features at all. Meanwhile, the greens who dare to question her scientific calling are airhead hippie-types who drone on about Gaia to the accompaniment of wafting joints. This is satire on the level of sitcom.

Like Greg Egan, McAuley argues for the superiority of science over both religion, or spirituality, and what might broadly be defined as the arts and humanities; and again, like Egan in a novel such as *Teranesia*, McAuley stacks the deck unfairly. "Their beliefs are based on faith, not observation,"



Kim Newman

Mariella thinks contemptuously of the greens, whose disregard of science reminds her of the arts students at her university, who knew sod-all about DNA but dared to look down on anyone who didn't know the minutiae of opera or Renaissance art.

This broadside doesn't quite hit home; in fact, it grossly flatters the intellectual attainments of the average arts student, who is nowadays likely to know far more about Bart Simpson than Bizet or Botticelli. The dumbing-down of the arts and arts education is a phenomenon just as disastrous as the commercialization of science, but not one in which McAuley displays any interest. It may be true, as Mariella asserts, that science is "the greatest achievement of humanity," but science is meaningless without the prior and overarching achievement of human culture.

There are areas of life that science

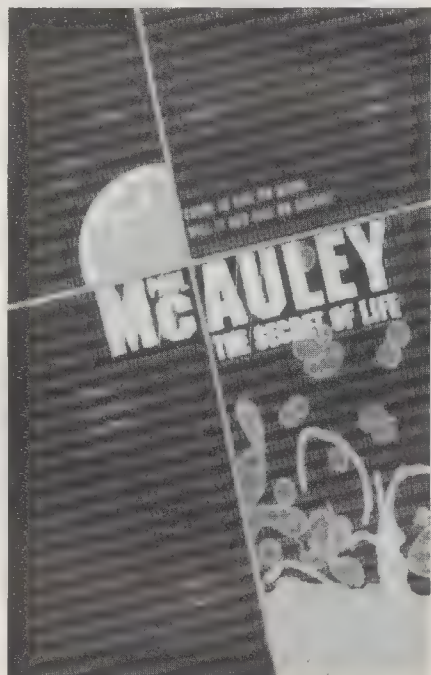
cannot address. Arty types like me will never be good at stinks and bangs (as English public schoolboys used to call science), but we like to think we can still be of some humble use in the world. In *The Secret of Life*, non-scientists – note the bit-part given to a white-trash security guard – are little more than passive imbeciles, caught up in a technocratic society beyond their control. At one point, Mariella gives a rousing public address about democracy and free speech. One can almost hear the cheers. But she seems to think that only scientists have anything worth saying.

The trouble with Paul McAuley's new book is that a highly imaginative writer has, in effect, hampered his imagination. In Greg Egan's work, didactic rationalism is balanced by the weirdness of the sf ideas; his work achieves an authentic strangeness. *The Secret of Life* is never strange enough, frittering away the Wyndhamesque promise of the bioslick in a welter of thrillerish to-and-froing that might leave us amused, but never amazed.

Kim Newman is one writer who has never held himself back; nor does he in *Dracula Cha Cha Cha* (Simon & Schuster, £16.99), a novel released in the US in 1998, now making its first UK appearance. Continuing (and, by the looks of it, concluding) the vampire sequence begun in *Anno Dracula* and *The Bloody Red Baron*, the new book updates Newman's retro vampire world to the attractive setting of 1959 Rome – all zipping Vespas and *La Dolce Vita* – where the vampire jet-set converge for the latest wedding of the exiled Transylvanian count. Alas, a vampire killer is on the loose. Soon there are three corpses in the Trevi Fountain, and Newman's cast of very human vamps and vampiresses are all getting just a little bit worried.

The blurb describes this novel as "blood-chilling," but of course it is nothing of the kind. Call it postmodernism or call it camp, this is horror played for laughs, with Newman's trademark allusions and references flowing thick and fast. The objection to this sort of thing – which must be allowed some force – is that it is merely clever rather than creative, a preening display of erudition instead of an absorbing story which is interesting in itself.

A case in point is Chapter 4, which introduces an unscrupulous young American drifter called Tom. When Tom first arrived in Italy, we are told, he batted on to Dickie, a rich vampire whom he subsequently killed. Now Tom has assumed Dickie's identity... This, of course, is *The Talented Mr Ripley*, with a bit of vampirism



chucked in for good measure. I'll admit that Newman's synopsis – for it is not much more than that – of Patricia Highsmith's crime classic served mainly to impress upon me the power of the original, and the weakness of the copy. Still – if you get it – it's a good joke.

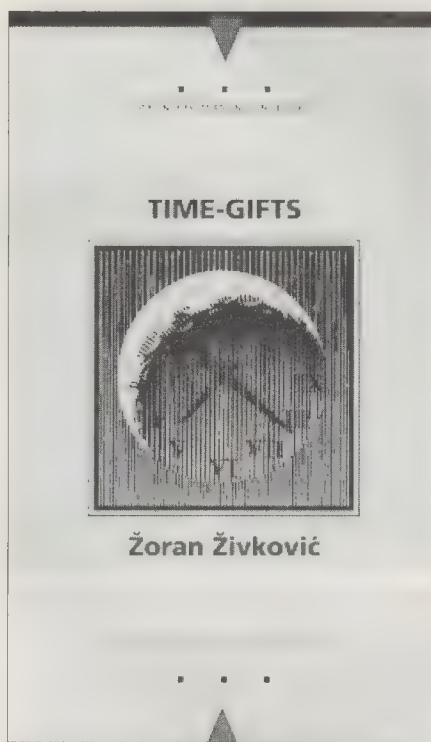
The novel is full of them. Many of its delights lie in the details, as in the revelation that the biggest new vampire celeb in late-'50s Britain is a certain Cliff Richard, whose undead status will ensure that he never ages, and that his career goes on forever. (Yes, but will they still play him on Radio 1?)

A different species of comic fantasy comes from Diana Wynne Jones, the celebrated British children's writer who in recent years has been publishing adult fantasies as well. Of these, the latest is *Year of the Griffin* (Gollancz, £16.99), a stand-alone sequel to her last, *The Dark Lord of Derkholm*.

The setting is a fantasyland university for wizards, where the struggle for university funding lures the faculty into devious schemes for extracting donations from the parents of rich students. The eccentric Wizard Corkoran, whose pet research project is to travel to the moon, is sure that he can secure the funds. Unfortunately it's an uphill battle when the new year brings a student intake including the son of a penniless king, a princess running from a forced marriage, a dwarf revolutionary – a sort of scholarship boy, the first dwarf ever to get to university – and a young Arabic type with an Emir's ruthless assassins on his trail. All of which is not to mention the griffin – yes, the giant, magical, golden bird. Such are the basic ingredients of a fast-moving caper in which wild magic is commonplace, and Corkoran's desire to get to the moon looks likely to come true in a most unexpected way.

Year of the Griffin is good, enjoyable entertainment, though lacking in the deeper charms that the author brings to her children's books. In depicting a band of student friends, stumbling in and out of trouble at a magical academy, the book obviously reminds one of Harry Potter, while the gentle satire of university life has more than a tang of Discworld. It is ironic that an author who was writing long before Pratchett, let alone Rowling, should now appear – to the uninitiated – to be trailing in their wake. Many of the children's titles have recently been reissued by HarperCollins in beautifully-presented B-format paperbacks. They are well worth acquiring.

Some years ago, Diana Wynne Jones published a cod-guidebook called



The Tough Guide to Fantasyland, a sort of *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* in miniature which cleverly mocks every imaginable aspect of genre fantasy.

What is wrong with genre fantasy, as the *Tough Guide* implies, is that most of it no longer seems fantastical. Ideas which were exciting in Tolkien's day – quests, magic swords, dragons, you name them – are now so commonplace that to write about them at all argues not for a richness of imagination but a positive lack of it. It is to quirkier writers that we must turn for exciting and original fantasy. Two such are the Serbian author Zoran Živković, and the better-known American, Jonathan Carroll.

Živković's *Time Gifts* (Northeastern

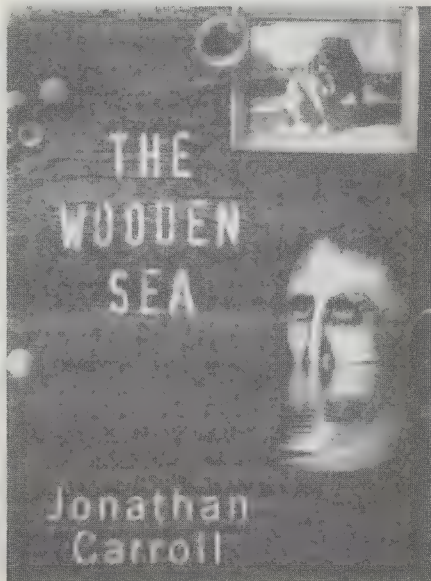
University Press, \$14.95), issued in translation in a series called "Writings from an Unbound Europe," is a brief (80-page) collection of linked stories which records the encounters between four characters in variously dire circumstances and the mysterious stranger who visits them in turn, offering to show them the future, the past, or to change the course of their lives. At first – as in the tale of a Galileo-ish astronomer, condemned by the church – the parable-like structure seems too simple, too pat; but what is ingenious in this short book is the way in which the implications of the material are progressively complicated and enriched.

Three of the stories could stand on their own. Most impressive – someone should anthologize it – is "The Watchmaker," an evocative tale about what it would really mean to have a second chance at life. The final story, "The Artist," unites the themes of the book in a powerful synthesis, commenting openly on all the previous tales. In places, the fantasy elements seem laboured – the timeslips, for example, take quite some time, bringing to mind the interminable spinning Tardis sequence in the first episode of *Doctor Who* – but this is sophisticated, philosophical fantasy of a high order.

Time is also the theme of Jonathan Carroll's novel *The Wooden Sea* (Tor, \$23.95). Carroll's first book, *The Land of Laughs*, was recently reissued as a Millennium "Fantasy Masterwork." It is a title richly deserved. Carroll is a fantasist of remarkable intelligence, wit and style, and all his gifts are engagingly on display in the new novel, an account of the bizarre misadventures of Frannie McCabe, one-time juvenile delinquent, now Chief of Police in Carroll's fictional small town of Crane's View, New York.

It all begins – like a meandering joke – when a three-legged, one-eyed dog comes wandering into McCabe's office, and promptly dies on the floor. Around its neck, the dog wears a collar with a tag bearing the name "Old Vertue" (*sic*). After an exuberant "what to do with a dead dog" sequence, reminiscent of the one in Michael Chabon's recently-filmed campus comedy *Wonder Boys*, things start to get stranger.

In an art book called *Great Animal Portraits*, McCabe discovers a centuries-old picture of a dog just like the one he has buried – a picture entitled "Old Vertue." It's not long before Old Vertue has risen from the grave (again), and soon time itself, for McCabe, has gone haywire. Not only is he meeting multiple versions of himself – as a teenager, as an old man, as a small child – but he finds himself caught up in a bizarre conspiracy involving shady business dealings



and mysterious aliens from a planet with a name that sounds like "Rat's Potato." And with global apocalypse just around the corner, what is the answer to the riddle, "How do you row a boat on a wooden sea?"

Fantasists of the genre sort are sometimes criticized for making everything too cosmic, for always throwing the fate of the universe into the bal-

ance. One amusing aspect of *The Wooden Sea* is the way in which Carroll pushes the stakes to the utmost – he is more audacious by far than the average genre hack – yet not only contains it all within a restricted, commonplace setting, but makes the miracles and wonders seem strangely logical within the terms of the story.

If anyone else had written it, *The*

Wooden Sea might be merely a wearisome farrago of impossibilities. In Carroll's hands, this truly nutty story is not only a superb entertainment but, in the end, a moving and profound fable about being young, growing old, and the changes that time brings. The ending is wonderful.

Tom Arden

www.tomarden.com

The eight stories in Eric Brown and Keith Brooke's *Parallax View* (Sarob Press, £19.50) may span a galaxy of wonders, but they focus (as Stephen Baxter notes in his introduction to the collection) squarely on the human soul. In certain stories – Brown's accomplished "A Prayer for the Dead," Brooke's "Jurassic and the Great Tree" – this connection is made overt: a young boy learns that the planet on which he lives is doomed to a lifespan shorter than his own; three explorers contained within one body are faced with a frightening, but ultimately transformational, choice as to how far they will go to protect the ecosystem of a world to which they do not really belong. Others – the protagonist of the slyly horrifying "The Denebian Cycle" – must, conversely, decide upon how separate they are to remain from a hostile, but seductive, alien environment. Ultimately, each story in this collection concerns the manner in which human beings – for good or ill – transcend their circumstances and justify the acts by which they do so.

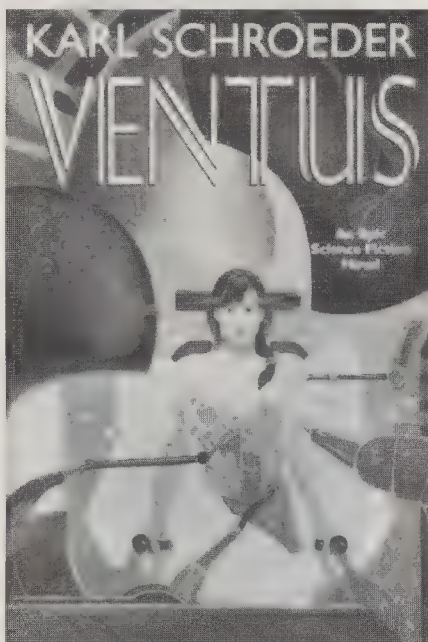
Perhaps this is no more than the essence of compelling storytelling, but where Brooke and Brown's strength lies is in the detailing of those circumstances. A man on a desert world dedicated to the continuance of a hundred religious cults discovers a sinister alien artwork and a grieving mother – or is she? A young pianist falls in love with a mysterious prodigy whose talent appears to rival that of Beethoven – or does it? The driving force behind each one of these stories is an ethical dilemma, embedded in a labyrinth of marvels. It is here that I find myself faced with a dilemma of my own: though I would have liked to have been as greatly entranced by the ethical questions as I was by their setting, I remained conscious of a certain sense of dissatisfaction at the end of several of these pieces.

Ironically, that dissatisfaction arises because the protagonists of these stories remain all too human, and the issues they confront are familiar ones. Fathers are alienated from sons, women seek revenge, people must decide whether to sacrifice their colleagues in order to save themselves, and so forth. In relatively few stories ("The Voyage of the *Oh Carollian*" is one) does the morality that is the driving force behind the protagonists'

motives depend on the context in which the story is set. "Under Antares" could plausibly have been placed in Africa; "A Prayer for the Dying," minus the motif of global disaster and an alien encounter, could have taken place in the United States without losing too much of its macrocosmic/microcosmic metaphorical impact. I felt that, rather too often, the plot had been conjured up to fit into a setting with which Brooke and

Compelling Storytelling

Liz Williams



Brown had fallen in love.

But much depends on why one reads stories, and what one seeks in them. I've caused strong men to choke on their drink by telling them that I'd rather read something that was beautifully written or had a fascinating context than a work which was plot-perfect but pedestrian. This is why "A Prayer for the Dying," in spite of my quibbles regarding its structural basis, will stay with me. And indeed this whole collection had a certain nostalgia for me, a return to the days before scientific exactitude, where men walk the dangerous streets of alien cities beneath immense crimson suns; where otherworldly forests harbour strange and sinister life – Brooke and Brown's work has a real sweep to it, and if you're looking to recapture that sadly clichéd sensation of a sense of wonder, this anthology will not disappoint.

Ventus by Karl Schroeder (Tor, \$27.95) reminded me gratifyingly of an onion: unpeeling itself in layers as it went along. Although we know from the outset that it's set on another planet, it begins as a fairly standard fantasy of the Mittel European school, with 18th-century overtones. The young protagonist, Jordan, is a stonemason; the sort of solid, dignified profession that makes reliably stoical heroes once its practitioners get out into the world a bit. In trying to save his sister from the usual sort of dodgy aristocrat, Jordan falls in with a mysterious woman who possesses some peculiar abilities, and who seems to know a great deal more about life and the world than he does. This is hardly surprising, since the Lady Calandria May is swiftly revealed to be an off-world visitor, hunting down the avatar of a rogue warlord. Jordan and Calandria May team up, and aided by an assortment of locals and offworlders alike, they set off in search of the avatar, and in doing so manage to change the world.

Like May herself, nothing on *Ventus* – the country mansions that so liberally dot the landscape, the capricious spirits and gods whose whims run the world, and even the pleasing forests, seas and parklands that comprise the terrain – is quite what it seems. A juxtaposition of haute technology with stock fantasy idyll at first seems anomalous, but it works rather well,

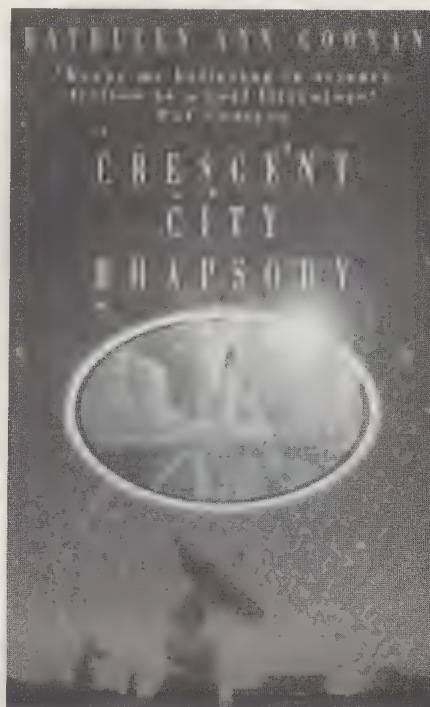
giving rise to some imaginative and unnerving creations (the liquid stone mothers that haunt the interiors of walls, and the vast rogue moons with their dangling hooks that drift across the countryside).

The setting also serves as the basis for some intriguing ontological issues: Ventus is an integrated eco-system in which the only discordant element is (as usual) mankind, yet it is an eco-system which has been almost wholly created by mankind itself. The Winds, designed to generate a home for the early colonists of Ventus, have evolved far beyond their initial role as servitors of the colonists' needs: they have become a sentient system, with its own voice, and it is a matter of some in-depth exploration on the part of the author as to whether this is a voice we are even capable of understanding, let alone sympathizing with. This is a point often overlooked by the more anthropomorphic members of the Green Party, but it is a point that needs making: on Ventus, humanity is not so much an integral part of the eco-system, nor its potential destroyer. On Ventus, we are merely superfluous to requirements. Quite what that means for the planet itself and for its inhabitants, is taken to some uneasily logical conclusions.

With an engaging set of characters who undergo substantial shifts in circumstance and morality throughout the book (a rare phenomenon in standard fantasy, and welcome here), a good, swift pace and a really intriguing piece of world-building, *Ventus* is a piece of science-fantasy that is a credit to both genres.

The events outlined in Kathleen Ann Goonan's *Crescent City Rhapsody* (Millennium, £6.99) begin in 1212, when an unexplained pulse knocks out satellite communications and throws the world into a drive towards alternative forms of technology. Central to this impetus is the development of nanotech – an area of research that literally begins to run riot in the chaos of a world filled with new mysteries. Children conceived at the time of the pulse exhibit quasi-autistic behaviour and curious powers. Government spooks track down and murder astrophysicists. Biocities are established, where communication takes place by means of “bionan” bees and flowers. Memetic plagues periodically sweep the land, contaminating whole areas with demented notions; the minds of entire populations are wiped clean and filled with something entirely different. Goonan's world exemplifies the Chinese curse “May you live in interesting times” – small wonder that so many of her characters look longingly towards space.

The novel illustrates the span of



years in which the world becomes irretrievably altered through the eyes of a cast of characters, primarily New Orleans mob boss Marie Laveau, herself resurrected after a successful assassination attempt by means of nanotech, and manic-depressive radio astronomer Zeb Aberley. Goonan's protagonists literally re-make a shattered world. Entire cities are transformed with a palpable sense of glee (the prerogative of the sf writer!): Kyoto succumbs to the sweeping transformations of nanotech, and Paris isn't far behind. And that's just for starters...

Crescent City Rhapsody is a roller-coaster read: gripping, engaging, and chock full of ideas. Perhaps it's a little too full: some of the notions encom-

passed here are sketchily explored, and crucial questions are not fully resolved (at least in this novel, which is a forerunner to two previous books, *Queen City Jazz* and *Mississippi Blues*, and it may be that Goonan develops and expands her ideas in these earlier works). There are some breathtaking sweeps of imagination, from the tragic to the comedic, and some great throwaway notions (I was particularly taken with the James Thurber “plague” experienced in Columbus, Ohio, which granted me the irresistible vision of the inhabitants multiplying numbers in their heads *en masse* and checking whether their eyes shine in the headlights of oncoming cars).

However, certain potentially compelling characters – Tamchu, the General, and the clone Kalina – get lost in the general *melée*. Perhaps their story is picked up in the next in the series: I hope so, as Goonan has an interesting take on the people in her novels, and I'd hate to see that go to waste.

Goonan is also a little too cavalier with the disasters that her novel contains: for a book that explores the potential ghastliness of science run riot, the ending is startlingly upbeat. One gets the impression that the author isn't too sure whether to play things for laughs or not, and that's a tension that doesn't sit well in a novel that's trying to deal with so many concepts. The pace is variable: it's too long to be as snappy a read as the tone warrants, and ideas are presented in a rather rambling manner, which is a shame, as they are excellent ones. However, this is the first of Goonan's Nanotech cycle that I've read, and it's definitely intriguing enough for me to want to go on and read the others. This is a world that inspires a genuine curiosity about its future, and our own.

I was delighted to discover, at the start of Sean Russell's *The One Kingdom: Book One of The Swans' War* (Orbit, £10), that the three young men who set out onto the unknown reaches of the River Wynnnd are neither heroes on a mighty quest nor warriors trying to make a name for themselves, but are, essentially, antique dealers. This is a notion of the protagonist-as-person-next-door which has, I feel, been sadly overlooked in modern fantasy.

In case this should serve as a deterrent to those less insanely whimsical than this reviewer, I should perhaps add that they don't remain antique dealers for very long. A meeting with a mysterious stranger (almost immediately murdered – or is he?) and an even more mysterious bird soon put paid to any ambitions Tam, Baore and Fynnol might have to do a quick bit of road-show-esque trading. Intermittently but doggedly pursued by a bunch of men-



at-arms, and haunted by an elusive water spirit, their attempts to reach the summer fair at Westbrook are marked by tragedy, disaster and embroilment in the affairs of a group of rival aristocratic clans, whose blood feud has pretty much dispatched any hope of socio-economic advancement that might otherwise be experienced by this particular society. The lands along the river Wynnd have been racked for several generations by this feud, the embers of which are being vigorously stirred into life by the current generation of the families Wills and Renne.

In addition to the adventures of our three young heroes, therefore, we also get a glimpse into the lives of various members of the aristocracy: particularly Elise Wills – who, for a change in put-upon fantasy heroines, would actually quite like to marry the man to whom her wicked uncle is affiancing her, but who can't, because if she does, it will start a war. Elise, too, is obliged to take to the river, along with a band of wandering minstrels and a curiously familiar gentleman with a rare pet bird. Meanwhile, sundry other mem-

bers of the aristocracy scheme, plot and attempt an assassination at the aforementioned Westbrook Fair.

I'm afraid that I kept losing track of the various aristocratic machinations which make up a sizeable part of this novel, and would have preferred to concentrate exclusively on the plight of Elise (who is spirited if not especially original) and the three reluctant adventurers. Certain characters – the elusive "Scarlet-Pimpernel" Alaan, and the story-finder Cynddl – proved intriguing, and I hope these get more emphasis in subsequent parts of the trilogy. The villain, who appears to have a partially supernatural past, is really unpleasant: unlike most villains, he doesn't embark upon lengthy explanations, or endeavour to initiate subtle schemes, but is simply a sadist (a portrayal that is commendably economically drawn). I hated him, so Russell can be pleased about that bit of character description!

Tam, however, is a fairly stock protagonist, and I felt that he was outshone as the novel progressed. His story became rather lost, and I found

myself more interested in the originally stolid, but increasingly haunted, Baore. Melancholy, pensive characters are something that Russell does well, and there is a shadowy, wistful tone to the narrative that gives this novel a subtlety lacking from other, more gung-ho fantasy. On the down side, I found the pace was frequently slow, and there was not quite the resolution I should have liked to have seen even in the first part of a trilogy. I also have something of a pet hate about context-dependent names (Pwyll, Cynddl etc) occurring outside that context: neither the Valemen nor the gypsy-like Fael have any particular Celtic characteristics, so why not invent an alternative nomenclature for them? It gives a rather patchwork feel to an otherwise effective setting, which is a shame. The "French Renaissance" aristocracy fare rather better in this respect. But these are quibbles: if you're into cut-above-average, well-written fantasy that (like rivers) takes its time to get to places, this is the novel for you.

Liz Williams

It's just the way the cards are dealt, but this was a *noisy* fan of books. In the million or so words that I read there was a lot of din, a wealth of uncontrolled explosions; there was good noise travelling fast, and some incredible energy to feast upon.

First up was *Phantoms and Fiends* by R. Chetwynd-Hayes (Robert Hale, £17.99). If we were to sum up this man's talent in a phrase, perhaps it would be this: that he has the ability to emphasize the comical interdependence between the spirit world and the world of human beings. Which is not to say that he is without his flaws. From time to time, the cumulative tradition upon which he builds seems to have been plundered too much, and the tale comes out of a factory, rather than a mind. But when he is on form he is a very whimsical writer, with a neat turn of phrase and a good voice with which to sing. More often than not, we can see the twinkle in his eye – although he writes in his Afterword that he is "too subtle for the American market" before going on to cite someone at his publishing house who said, "Our critics say you're too English." All of which may well be true; but to any ear, well-tuned to nuance, I am certain that this ghost writer (not horror writer) will appeal.

Phantoms and Fiends is over 30 year's worth of misshapen shadows and strange echoes; of contact and disappearance; and of murderous spouses (a key theme in Chetwynd-Hayes's oeuvre). And although the book has not been arranged chronologically, it is an interesting coincidence that the best stories, I feel, are in the first part.

Good Noise

David Mathew

"Moving Day," for example, sees a young man move into the home of his great-aunts, knowing that one day all this will be his. Continually referring to their longing to *move* (it is italicized in the text), they give the reader cause to think that the subject of death is abroad. These women, who converse with the inhabitants of the graveyard, surely, are looking forward to the final passing. Well, yes and no. And how far would you go for a bumper inheritance?

"She Walks on Dry Land" has a

Regency setting, and a nobleman who wants to stop for the night in an isolated village, despite the warnings of imminent madness that he hears: any stranger who looks upon the ghost of a murdered good-time girl (a particular one, you understand) will bleed his sanity away into the waves that will claim him. "The Bodmin Terror" takes that staple ingredient of many a horror tale, not to mention local myth – that of the wandering, lost travellers (the story was published in 1970) – and forms a seal with the beginning of civilized time. The travellers meet a strange old woman (and we really do mean *old*) on the misty moors, and she takes them back to her place for dinner.

In total, there are 21 tales in *Phantoms and Fiends* – not to mention a good introduction by Charles Grant – and this is, at its best, a good and *spidery* volume, tickling all over your scalp, all over. R. Chetwynd-Hayes is the major-domo in the haunted household of writers. He can stick his tongue out well, though rarely his neck.

Much more original – and frightening, and funny, and brow-numbing – is John Clute's first sf novel, *Appleseed* (Orbit, £16.99). Let us not mince our words: it is a masterpiece – a long-awaited storm of din; and an apophthegm, as it turns out, and however premature it might seem, of the 21st century. Not only does Clute have his finger on the pulse, he has his knuckles on the same – and is pushing down hard. He knows his pressure points.

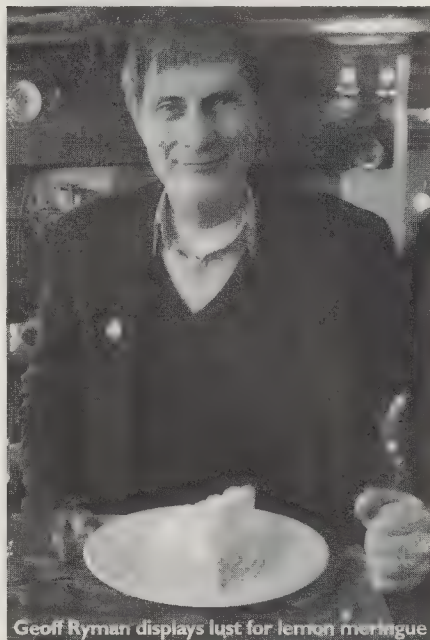
In terms of story, we have a cool simplicity to behold. Nathaniel Freer, a



merchant and transporter from the rag-and-bone shop of genre (Clute's words, in another context) lands on the planet Eolhixir. The time is the far future, and Freer's co-travellers are an Artificial Intelligence (who/which borders on the schizophrenic) and a team of assistants. But all is far from well. All is not "okey dokey." Information is a weapon, and a locust-like plague of information and data is threatening all that Freer knows. And not only that: Freer is obliged to get involved in a very old difference of opinions that might also put a knife to his life.

In terms of language, however, there is no such thing as simplicity. This is, after all, John Clute – the man who single-handedly raised the ante when it comes to reviews (in any genre), and so why should we expect anything *less* than a challenge? We should not! At any rate, nothing less than a challenge is certainly what's provided. Throughout this excellent book, the language is dense, multi-chronic, and omnivorous. We hold our noses, gulp for air, and dip into a long paragraph. And we enjoy the treading water. These liquids are totally new.

Some writers – some of my favourite writers – ask the big *Why?* questions, and spit like cooked meat in an effort to display their outrage; but Geoff Ryman, I think, asks the big *What-Ifs?* What if I could show what everyone was thinking for a couple of minutes on a train on the underground? What if houses were like faithful pets, and could follow you around unless they were tied to posts? He is simply one of the most original writers alive, and I love his work. "Dead Space for the Unexpected" is



Geoff Ryman displays lust for lemon meringue

Geoff Ryman Lust

Four letters. Infinite possibilities.



From the author of 253

one of the best short stories I have ever read, and *Was* and *The Child Garden* are masterpieces. In Ryman's worlds, the *what-if?* structure gets splintered into termitaries of *whys*.

Let's add *Lust* to that list of masterpieces. *Lust* (Flamingo, £9.99) is an unexpected last-minute pleasure, arriving just in time to make it into the embers of this column. Hilarious and deadly serious (as always), it is a fable concerning a man who, quite frankly, cannot get it up. Michael is sexually impotent. That said, he is not forbidden from having a sex life of sorts as soon as he discovers he can conjure any partner he wishes out of the air. It starts in an underground station: a man he likes the look of down the gym reveals all; but of course it is some times before Michael learns to accept his "miracle" – and to try to push its boundaries. If sex with a casual acquaintance is green-lighted, why not sex with a cartoon that you fancied in your younger days? Why not sex with your younger *self*? Why not sex with Johnny Weissmuller, the guy who used to play Tarzan?

And why does it have to be sex at all? Michael summons up another version of his contemporary self, the better to clear the decks at work. But as soon as the copy goes, so does their hard graft; and Michael is forced to observe some hard lessons about his gift, about his life, about Life. What if nothing means much about anything at all? What if friends who die of AIDS can be copied minus the virus, or what if they can't?

First rate. Another gem from this most unconventional writer.

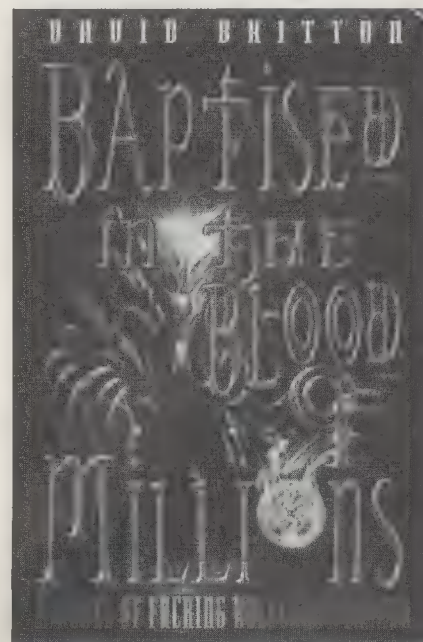
There are those who whine about so-called mainstream novelists dipping their toes into the waters of genre. But live and let live, I reckon – which,

in its turn, will annoy some, no doubt. A good book's a good book, for me... or at least that's how I'm feeling right now. For that's the problem with print, is it not? You can staple your message to the mast, but what happens if that message is changed by circumstance, by event? There are plenty of "mainstream" writers who shake their heads and smile with wistful regret at their contributions to the canon. Either that, or they refuse to believe that what they have written is genre work at all.

No one is covering his balls and stating defiantly that T. C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* (Bloomsbury, £15.99) is science fiction, but let's face facts. Timely, amusing sf is what is here: a novel about political activism, good love, and the future of the planet. The year is 2025, and global warming and pollution have slashed apart the Earth's eco-sphere. The novel's protagonist helps to protect endangered species, although he has a past at odds with his current passions. But then our hero's ex-wife arrives, and the reader is informed that she wishes to write a book about Ty's daughter, Sierra, who has earned herself a reputation as a sitter-on of doomed trees. A flood occurs; and Ty's story, now and the past strands, is told. At no point does the reader forget just what Boyle is capable of, poetically speaking. Such a phrase as "hair the color of midnight in a cave" is but a small taster for anyone yet to explore this writer's undoubted delights. A very insistent writer, always willing to embrace the zeitgeist.

Endwords.

Neither fish nor fowl, neither magazine nor paperback, is *Crimewave 4: Mood Indigo*, edited by Andy Cox. I have not read the previous three *Crimewaves*, but this one was excellent, and I intend to catch up and to follow future developments. Beautifully designed (simul-



taneously *noirish* and avant-garde, like singing both flat and sharp at the same time), it is a 130-page A5 collection of shorts, very shorts and longers. I loved Antony Mann's "Shopping," a two-page sequence of shopping lists that suggest, in turn, a solitary existence, a meeting with someone that the writer is trying to impress, the budding of sexual intimacy with the same, the *perversion* of sexual intimacy with the same, apologies... and then something more. Extremely powerful. And Chaz Brenchley – a favourite writer of mine – gives us "Junk Male." A murdered woman, an abandoned child, and a detective-cum-riverboat-captain-cum-pimp is the unlikely but convincing narrator. With

another ten pieces to boot, this is very good value at £5.99 and can be ordered via ttapress@aol.com.

And *Baptised in the Blood of Millions* (Savoy, £20 – ouch) is the latest in the "Lord Horror" mythos, from the talented pen of David Britton. As ever, the team behind Savoy have done their deals with the devil and completed something majestic. The book is beautifully designed (John Coulthart), and edited (Michael Butterworth); but the real congratulations, surely, go to the obvious *maturation* of Britton's style. Despite his critics (and the work of Savoy has rarely courted less than controversy, particularly in recent years, and critics have been many), Britton's work has never

been about subjecting Jews to torture at the hands of Lord Horror. And yes, it sounds dumb to have to reiterate this, but any squaring of the record seems reasonable, given the context. Britton's books are not about hatred. They are about the satirization of hatred, and the consequent ebullience. Or at least, that's the way I read the motherfuckers (such as *Motherfuckers*). Who's to say that I am right? As the Savoy team puts it in the accompanying puff-piece, good art poses questions; only bad art gives the answers. But the guesses engendered by the text make *Baptised in the Blood of Millions* a worthwhile addition to the lottery of what to read next.

David Mathew

"Mass culture's equivalent of the squarish, hard-skinned, tasteless tomato, grown for quick, reliable, low-cost machine harvesting." That was how Tod Gitlin, Director of the Mass Communications program at the University of California, once described movies made for television. Now, fan-boy Fraser A. Sherman has catalogued an entire shopping mall full of the hard-skinned and the tasteless in his book *Cyborgs, Santa Claus and Satan* (McFarland, \$45.95 or £36), a survey of American telefantasy films. And what killer tomatoes they turn out to be.

Sherman's work takes the reader on a journey from the salad days of 1968 to the end of the fast-food '90s and spans nearly 600 titles, organized alphabetically, reviewed with cast and crew, then listed chronologically. According to the author, Universal's 1964 production *See How They Run* (three orphans unwittingly carry top-secret documents) was the first made-for-television movie to be broadcast on American screens, *Shadow on the Land* (a future America under a military dictatorship) was the first minor genre movie, and *Fear No Evil* (a woman communes with her dead husband via a haunted mirror) was the first full-blown horror "film." The latter is also the earliest movie in the book to be listed with full cast, plot summary and review. Sherman's verdict? "A familiar story, but beautiful to look at."

These TV movies' country of origin may be America, but as Sherman's reference work continues, it becomes clear just how much of the genetically-modified sub-genre has made it over here: on television, in cinemas and, more recently, on videocassette. I'll never forget the sense of outrage I felt at being asked to pay to see theatrical releases of such re-packaged TV fare as *Spiderman* and *Battlestar Galactica* (a marketing trend probably started with spliced-together episodes of *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*).

Since the 1980s, the number of made-for-TV science-

fiction/fantasy/horror movies seems to have increased dramatically. A quick title count shows 15 were made in 1980, 14 in '81, and ten in '82. This compares with 45 in '96, 53 in '97 and 53 in '98. Quantity hasn't diminished quality, because the quality was never that good in the first place. Science-fiction fans will gloomily recall *The Martian Chronicles*, which I watched with patient boredom, while the works of Stephen King have been reasonably well served – although Sherman treats them as television equivalents of crop blight. If you are ever threatened with *The Langoliers*, get out of the vicinity before paralysis sets in.

Sherman's work covers both TV movies and mini-series (known in the trade as the "long-form"). In theory,

these formats might have been at the cutting edge of the medium. As Gitlin points out in his own book, *Inside Prime Time* (Routledge), TV movies are cheaper than Hollywood blockbusters and a season of hour-long episodes, so less money is risked. They have a longer production schedule than television series, allowing writers and directors to craft more sophisticated forms of storytelling. Their transitory nature (TV movies are rarely repeated) can escape the censorious gaze of pressure groups. But, read together, Sherman and Gitlin give a good account of why most of these movies fail to fulfil their potential.

Among the many factors that shape made-for-television movies are network executives' personal can-do culture that invests heavily in stories of individual triumph over adversity, and self-censorship in the face of the fears and whims of sponsors and advertisers. The networks' image of the audience as apolitical, white, middle-class, gentile, heterosexual families only exacerbates the problem. Taken together, these factors explain why TV movies focus on heart-warming stories about apolitical white, middle-class, gentile, heterosexual, home-loving families triumphing over adversity without raising any social issues, and why social issues, politics, blacks, Hispanics, Jews and gays are seen only as a source of difficulty.

Sherman, in his all-too-brief introduction, is right to point out that such pressures are compounded by the need to generate audiences far larger than the readership of sf novels. Also, sf, horror and fantasy challenge television's domestic vision. If nothing else, sf can dramatize social change and society itself as an agent of change. Sherman also points to other, more prosaic factors that weaken telefantasy movies: many are pilots for series that are never made.

If made-for-TV movies are a key feature of the new television landscape, another must be telefantasy series that would have been cancelled if they

Killer Tomatoes

Tim Robins



had to depend on the three major US networks. In these days of seven-season runs, it's hard to recall that, until *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the longest-running US telefantasy series was *The Incredible Hulk*. No wonder *Doctor Who* fans felt smug. That changed when production companies bypassed the networks and sold their product direct to syndication or to new cable and satellite networks anxious to promote their channels on the backs of cult viewing.

The *X-Files* is a particularly good example of this type of new American television programme. Nevertheless, I remember watching its pilot episode in horror. It wasn't the story – a cross between *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* – that was scary, it was the realization that the programme was pitched at an audience who actually believed that aliens were regularly visiting Earth in UFOs and abducting humans for obscure reasons involving nasal implants and rectal probes.

Of course, I once fell for something like this. At 13, I read *Chariots of the Gods* and tried to scandalize my church youth group by suggesting Biblical miracles were easily explained once you rejected the implausible figure of God and accepted the fact that Incas rocketed around the stars wearing jetpacks and oxygen masks. This theological debate might have been a meeting of the mindless, but belief in UFOs seems surprisingly common. In 1997, a Gallup opinion poll conducted in the USA found 71% of people thought the government knew more about UFOs than they were saying, and 48% thought UFOs were real.

Jan Delasara's book, *PopLit, PopCult and The X-Files: A Critical Exploration* (MacFarland, \$39.95 or £32), tries to make sense of such findings. My starting point would be the poll's methods, particularly the way its questions are worded. Delasara's starting point is Carl Jung. There's a definite synchronicity here: the implausible explained by the non-sensical. For the uninitiated, Synchronicity is a kind of cosmological coincidence, a "falling together" of similar events in time and space that have no causal connection. For Jung, synchronicity often occurs at times of heightened emotions, including acts of creativity. The coincidences point to the work of archetypes shaping nature as a kind of transcendental causation or organizing principle. For Delasara, it is possible to see *The X-Files* as a product of synchronicity. For instance, Fox Mulder shares his name with the Fox network, and the Fox is a trickster figure in native mythology, and, numerologically, the letters F-O-X can

be decoded as 666, and 666 is the ancient Greek number representing Reason, and Mulder is a rational man seeking truth... And so on.

Delasara's own position isn't Jungian, but she suggests *The X-Files'* success is due to its coincidence with the American people's encounters with government deception and administrative failure. Her account of Americans' attempts to achieve psychic equilibrium in the face of such traumas is thoughtful but also provides a moment of comedy. When the author tells a repairman that she is writing a book on *The X-Files*, he says, "I don't watch that show. I just don't want to think about things like that." This leads the author to conclude, "He could have meant things that go bump in the night, of course, but I don't think so. I believe that he was referring to the darker, more disturbing symbolic subtext of the series."

When it comes to Jung, it's not that I don't want to believe, it's that I don't know how. Surely 666 is also the Number of the Beast. Is Mulder satanic or just damned? The shamanistic fox is a supernatural figure. Doesn't this contradict the image of Mulder as a rational investigator? Jung emphasized the importance of human meaning-making, but there needs to be a difference between making the world meaningful and just making things up. That said, Delasara has a mission to explain, and things can be learnt from this book without accepting its explanatory framework.

For me, what the book really shows is that science fiction, conspiracy theory and cultural studies lend themselves to paranoid understandings of the world. Both genres often rely on "conceptual breakthroughs" in which apparently quotidian perceptions are suddenly revealed to give access to hidden knowledge or previously unrecognized organizing structures. If the truth is out there, the question becomes how do we reach it? Cue those masters of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault, etc. But sometimes a cigar is just a cigar and the truth is staring you in the face. I fear those times are more often than we'd like to think.

Knowledge comes at a price, £157.50 to be exact. That's how much you can expect to pay for Dennis Fischer's *Science Fiction Film Directors, 1895-1998* (McFarland, \$175 or £157.50). This reference work is a hefty hardback to match the hefty price. It contains detailed accounts of 83 directors, from David Allen (*The Dungeonmaster* and *Puppet Masters II*) to Robert Zemeckis (*Back to the Future*, *Contact*). This is a fannish work and individual entries seem to vary according to the author's enthusi-

asm, knowledge or resources. Appendices cover "The 100 Most Popular Science Fiction Films," according to the Internet Movie Database Team's collation of votes (*Star Wars* is number one, *Short Circuit* is number 100) and a discussion of "Classic Science Fiction Films from Non-Genre Directors."

I'd describe the book as a lifetime's work except it's billed as "a companion volume to the author's *Horror Film Directors, 1931-1990*." Some of that half-lifetime might have been spent systematizing the entries and referencing sources. Also, the writing can be patchy. For example: "[Castellari, director of *The Humanoid*] enjoyed inventing bizarre gangs such as the ones on roller skates. Castellari complained that he had a great deal of difficulty with Mark Gregory, whom he discovered in a gym. The film was shot for about \$1 million." This at least demonstrates three consecutive sentences don't make a paragraph.

Substance is as important as style, and there's lots of information here. I've interviewed Terry Gilliam on a number of occasions and I didn't know his middle name was Vance, that he joined the Sigma Alpha Epsilon Fraternity at college or that he avoided the draft by registering for the National Guard. I can see myself turning to Fischer's guide as a resource and for fun. Certainly, it will sit close at hand on my bookshelf (but only after I have reinforced the shelf with steel buttresses and taken out additional contents insurance on my house).

In contrast to the size and price of Fischer's magnum opus, *Season X* is a mere 24 A5 photocopied pages for 70 pence (cheques payable to "R. Hoskin"). It's a fanzine, so you'll have to order it from the editorial address: 1 Ravenbourne Road, East Twickenham, Middlesex TW1 2DG, UK. The 'zine is edited by Rik Hoskin with assistance from Steve Goble and Tim Brown. The editors' stated aim is to provide "the latest news on forthcoming science fiction movies, television shows, books and comic books, as well as updating you on old favourites." This is a tough agenda, except all is not as it seems.

Season X is a Boy's Own humour 'zine. An account of "*Star Trek: The Missing Seasons*" reports on a captain Pike adventure involving three bouncy young females assigned to the *Enterprise* for work experience. The title? "The Angels of Charlie." On the news front, *SFX* is reported to be defending accusations that they used a photograph of a young woman to obscure the magazine's logo so that it appeared to read as "SEX." The name of the accuser? Psychologist Jung Frankenstein.

Tim Robins

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Asher, Neal. **Gridlinked**. Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-90363-3, 426pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Rawlings, £10. (Sf novel, first edition; another British small-press writer makes good, and is now being relaunched by Macmillan as "a notable new talent from the publishers that bring you China Miéville and Peter F. Hamilton"; this looks to be an extravagant space opera.) *23rd March 2001.*

Barrett, David V. **The New Believers: A Survey of Sects, Cults and Alternative Religions**. Cassell, ISBN 0-304-35592-5, 544pp, hardcover, £20. (History and survey of unusual, esoteric and occult religious movements, some of them of science-fictional interest [e.g. the Church of Scientology]; first edition; illustrated with 16 pages of photographs, it's a considerable expansion and rewrite of the author's *Sects, 'Cults' and Alternative Religions: A World Survey and Sourcebook* [Blandford, 1996; that was a 320-page book, while this one is 544 pages]; Barrett is known in the sf field as a short-story writer, editor of the anthology *Digital Dreams* [1990], and contributor of reviews and interviews to *Interzone* and elsewhere; this is an interesting, informative and fair-minded work; recommended; the original version was reviewed by Molly Brown in *Interzone* 135.) *25th February 2001.*

Beagle, Peter S. **Tamsin**. Roc, ISBN 0-451-45820-6, 275pp, trade paperback, cover by Paul Youll, \$13. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; by the veteran author of *The Last Unicorn* [1968], this British-set ghostly tale, which we haven't seen until now, gained general praise in the America and was shortlisted for last year's World Fantasy Award – when it lost to... uh, *Thraxas* by "Martin Scott" [Martin Millar], a jury decision which caused many onlookers to scratch their heads.) *March 2001.*

Berg, Carol. **Transformation**. "Book One of The Rai-Kirah." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-075-X, 506pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; a debut novel by a new, but not young, American writer [born 1948] – "in the magical tradition of Maggie Furey and Robin Hobb," say the publishers.) *1st March 2001.*

Bisson, Terry. **The Pickup Artist**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87403-0, 240pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this looks fun: the publishers describe it as "Ray Bradbury meets Kurt Vonnegut... a sharp, witty and subversive exploration of the future of art, culture, and society as a whole.") *April 2001.*

Borchardt, Alice. **The Wolf King**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224717-8, 375pp, C-format paperback, £11.99. (Historical

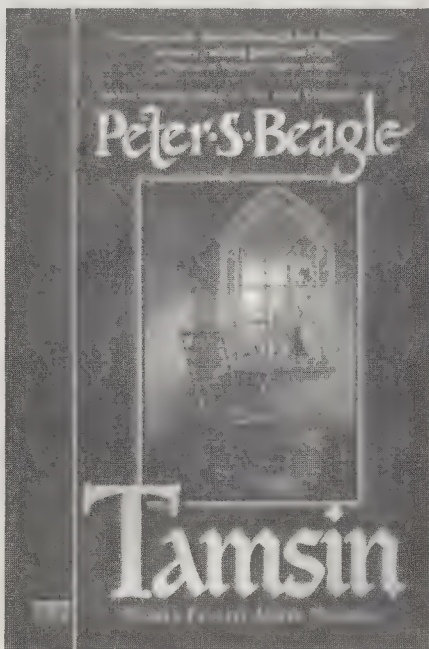
horror/romantic novel, first published in the USA, 2001; follow-up to *The Silver Wolf* [1998] and *Night of the Wolf* [1999]; the author is the sister of bestselling novelist Anne Rice.) *19th March 2001.*

Brewer, Gene. **K-Pax**. St Martin's, ISBN 0-312-97702-6, 233pp, A-format paperback, \$6.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this appears to be a work of "mainstream" sf by an American scientist; on its first publication in Britain, the reviewer in *The Guardian* described as "a mixture of *Starman*, *Oliver Sacks*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*"; apparently a film version is now in the offing, and the author has written a sequel [not seen] entitled *On a Beam of Light* [some preview pages from the latter are printed at the end of this paperback].) *Late entry: 2nd January publication, received in February 2001.*

Bunch, Chris. **The Empire Stone**. "The spectacular new fantasy epic." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-033-4, 359pp, A-format paperback, cover by David O'Connor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000.) *29th March 2001.*

Card, Orson Scott. **Alvin Journeyman: The Tales of Alvin Maker IV**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-029-6, xii+400pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 102; appearing in Britain for the first time, six years late, it's part of a series about an alternate, magical 19th-century America that's often reckoned to be Card's best work; Orbit have also reissued the first three books in the series [which *did* have UK editions, many years ago] – *Prentice Alvin*, *Red Prophet* and *Seventh Son*, all released in February 2001 and presumably uniform with this paperback.) *8th March 2001.*

Chapman, Stepan. **Dossier: A Collection of Short Stories**. Creative Arts Book Company [833 Bancroft Way, Berkeley, CA



BOOKS RECEIVED



FEBRUARY 2001

94710, USA], ISBN 0-88793-280-6, 166pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Literary fantasy/mainstream collection [the blurb describes the stories as "peculiar"], first edition; culled from the *Chicago Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *International Quarterly*, *Talebones* and other literary/small-press sources, this is a "first full-length collection" by the Philip K. Dick Award-winning author of *The Troika* [1998]; there are 17 stories; the book has an attractive cover illustration, but the publishers don't credit the artist.) *No date shown: received in February 2001.*

Clarke, Arthur C. **The City and the Stars**. "SF Masterworks, 39." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-763-2, 255pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1956; one of Clarke's finest novels – fabular, almost childlike but genre-perfect – it was an expansion of his earlier short novel *Against the Fall of Night* [Startling Stories, Nov. 1948; Gnome Press, 1953].) *8th March 2001.*

Constantine, Storm. **Sea Dragon Heir**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87366-2, 384pp, trade paperback, cover by Doug Beekman, \$14.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 153.) *3rd February 2001.*

Dendle, Peter. **The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia**. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0859-6, ix+249pp, hardcover, \$35. (Lightly illustrated A-Z critical guide to all horror and sf films featuring zombies; first edition; sterling-priced import copies should be available in Britain from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; a fairly lightweight reference book – many of the individual film entries are less than a page in length – but useful in the way that it focuses



on a particular theme, or motif, and in its exhaustiveness: over 200 movies are covered, from the early 1930s to the present.) *March 2001.*

Douglass, Sara. **The Nameless Day:**

The Crucible, Book One. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-710844-3, viii+584pp, C-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £11.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2000; the beginning of a third trilogy, set in an alternative 14th-century Europe, by Australia's most successful Big Commercial Fantasy writer.) *19th March 2001.*

Dunsany, Lord. **The King of Elfland's**

Daughter. Introduction by Neil Gaiman. "Fantasy Masterworks, 15." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-790-X, xiii+240pp, B-format paperback, cover by J. W. Waterhouse, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1924; the Gaiman introduction is taken from the 1999 Del Rey Books trade-paperback edition.) *8th March 2001.*

Farland, David. **Wizardborn: Book 3 of**

The Runelords. Earthlight, ISBN 0-684-86061-9, 424pp, C-format paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £10. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2001; "David Farland" is a pseudonym of sf writer Dave Wolverton.) *12th March 2001.*

Flynn, Michael. **Falling Stars.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87443-X, 414pp, hardcover, cover by Julie Bell, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; fourth and last in the near-future, hard-sf epic sequence begun in *Firestar* [1996], *Rogue Star* [1998] and *Lodestar* [2000].) *21st February 2001.*

Fox, Chris. **LUCI in the Sky.** Hutchinson, ISBN 0-09-179387-4, 453pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Near-future technothriller/sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; this is a debut book by a new American writer; the acronym "LUCI" stands for "Light Ultra Chip Intelligence" – and it's also the name given to "a warplane with a secret Doomsday mechanism.") *22nd February 2001.*

Goodkind, Terry. **Faith of the Fallen.**

Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07198-2, 539pp, C-format paperback, cover by Keith Parkinson, £11.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; this is Book Six of "The Sword of Truth," although it does not state as much on the front cover or title page.) *15th February 2001.*

Gunn, James. **The Science of Science-Fiction Writing.** Scarecrow Press, ISBN 1-57886-011-3, ix+232pp, trade paperback, £14.20. ("How-to" book for aspiring sf

writers, first published in the USA, 2000; this is the American first edition with a UK price and publication date specified, available in Britain from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; various parts of the book were first published as articles in *Writer's Digest*, *Extrapolation* and elsewhere; James Gunn [born 1923] is certainly a vastly experienced sf writer, with "36 books and nearly 100 short stories" to his credit; he is also a well-known critic and anthologist, so his advice here may be sager

than that to be found in most books of this type.) *19th April 2001.*

Herbert, Brian, and Kevin J. Anderson.

House Harkonnen: Prelude to Dune

II. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-75178-9, viii+626pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gerry Grace, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; the second volume of a trilogy which prequelizes [fine word!] the late Frank Herbert's bestselling novel *Dune* [1965]; Brian Herbert is the original author's son; presumably the more experienced Kevin J. Anderson has done most of the writing here.) *15th March 2001.*

Hobb, Robin. **Ship of Destiny: The Live-**

ship Traders, Book III. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-649887-6, 903pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2000; third in the popular trilogy about living ships; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 156; "Robin Hobb" is a pseudonym of Megan Lindholm.) *5th March 2001.*

Hoffman, Nina Kiriki. **Past the Size of**

Dreaming. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00802-X, 342pp, hardcover, cover by Tim Barrall, \$21.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a follow-up to the author's World Fantasy Award-nominated *A Red Heart of Memories* [1999], featuring the same witch heroine, Matt Black; it's in the attractive, small, squareish format which this publisher often favours – more publishing houses should follow suit: hardcover books have grown too large in dimensions over recent decades as they have competed for bookshop shelf-space – let's go back to more aesthetically-pleasing small hardcovers!) *March 2001.*

Jensen, Jan Lars. **Shiva 3000.** Pan, ISBN 0-

330-39327-9, 405pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; a debut novel by a new Canadian writer [we published a story by him in *Interzone* 101], it's set in a far-future India and described by the publishers as "a timeless fantasy"; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *IZ* 156.) *23rd March 2001.*

Joyce, Graham. **Dreamside.** Tor, ISBN 0-

312-87546-0, 254pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1991; the first American paperback edition of Joyce's debut novel, decked out with glowing quotes from such fashionable figures as Jonathan Carroll and Jonathan Lethem; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 51.) *12th March 2001.*

Kalogridis, Jeanne. **The Burning Times.**

HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-225991-5, 385pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Historical horror novel, first edition [?]; involving witchcraft and the Inquisition, this seems to be pitched at the Anne Rice market; Jeanne Kalogridis [born 1954] is perhaps best known to sf readers as J. M. Dillard, under which byline she has written a number of *Star Trek* novels.) *2nd April 2001.*

Lawhead, Stephen. **The Mystic Rose: The Celtic Crusades, Book III.** Voyager, ISBN

0-00-224667-8, 435pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Posen, £17.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *The Iron Lance* [1998] and *The Black Rood* [2000].) *19th March 2001.*

Lebbon, Tim. **As the Sun Goes Down:**

Stories. Introduction by Ramsey Campbell. Night Shade Books [560 Scott, #304, San Francisco, CA 94117], ISBN 1-892389-08-8, 248pp, hardcover, cover by Alan Clark, \$25. (Horror collection, first edition; there is a simultaneous limited edition priced at \$55 [not seen]; Tim Lebbon [born 1969] is a new British writer who lives in South Wales; apparently, he has had at least three earlier small-press books published, *Mesmer*, *Faith in the Flesh* and *White*, but we never saw them [although we did receive his PS Publishing novella *Naming of Parts* in August 2000], and has won a British Fantasy Award for *White*; the 16 stories here are either original or are reprinted from such out-of-the-way sources as *Enigmatic Tales* and *Gothic.Net* – all are dated either 1999 or 2000; this is an attractively designed and sturdily bound volume, and may become a collectors' item if Lebbon's stock continues to rise.) *Late entry: late 2000 publication, received in February 2001.*

Levinson, Paul. **Borrowed Tides.** Tor,

ISBN 0-312-84869-2, 238pp, hardcover, cover by Vincent Di Fate, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; a second novel by the author of *The Silk Code* [1999].) *March 2001.*

Lewis, Mick. **Rags.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53826-0, 251pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Third Doctor, Jo and the Brigadier; the author has previously written a horror novel, *The Bloody Man* [Citron Press, 1998].) *5th March 2001.*

Meaney, John. **Paradox.** Bantam, ISBN 0-

553-50589-0, 540pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2000; the second novel by a British writer whose short stories have appeared in *Interzone*; it's commended by David Langford and others; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 157.) *April (?) 2001.*

Miéville, China. **Perdido Street Station.**

Pan, ISBN 0-330-39289-1, 867pp, A-format paperback, cover by Edward Miller, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; the author's second novel, following *King Rat*, it's praised by John Clute, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, M. John Harrison, Michael Moorcock, Brian Stableford, Tricia Sullivan and others, and has been short-listed for this year's Arthur C. Clarke Award; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 155.) *9th March 2001.*

Muir, John Kenneth. **Terror Television:**

American Series, 1970-1999. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0890-1, ix+675pp, hardcover, \$75. (Unillustrated, chronologically-arranged episode guide and critical study of US horror-fantasy TV series; first edition; sterling-priced import copies should be available in Britain from

Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; this is another big, exhaustive book from an assiduous compiler of such tomes – see his earlier books, all detailed here over the past three or four years, on *Space 1999*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Doctor Who*, *Blake's 7*, and the films of Wes Craven and John Carpenter.) *March 2001.*

Nagata, Linda. **Vast.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-745-4, 359pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; scientifically-informed space opera, set aboard “the Null Boundary... a giant biotech starship,” this is the author's fourth novel, and her first to be published in Britain; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 157.) *8th February 2001.*

Nichols, Adam. **The Curer.** “The Whiteblade Saga, Book Three.” Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-531-1, 440pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) *8th February 2001.*

Piper, H. Beam. **The Complete Paratime.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00801-1, 424pp, trade paperback, cover by Dave Dorman, \$15. (Sf omnibus, first edition; it contains the fix-up novel *Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen* [1965] and the collection *Paratime* [1981], linked stories in what the publishers call the “classic Paratime Police” series; there is a useful introduction to the 1981 collection by John F. Carr, which is reprinted here.) *March 2001.*

Powers, Tim. **Declare.** Morrow, ISBN 0-380-97652-8, 517pp, hardcover, \$25. (Espionage novel [probably a “fantasy of history”], first edition; Powers is best known for his supernatural fantasies, but this book, which features the real-life spy Kim Philby, appears to be his attempt to enter the thriller-writing stakes; still, it seems to have many of the usual Powers ingredients below the Le Carré-like surface.) *Late entry: January publication, received in February 2001.*

Pratchett, Terry. **Thief of Time.** Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-60188-3, 316pp, hardcover, cover by Josh Kirby, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the 26th “Discworld” novel, by the author who, according to his publishers, is “Britain's bestselling living novelist,” has now “sold over 18 million books” and has had his work “translated into 27 languages.”) *3rd May 2001.*

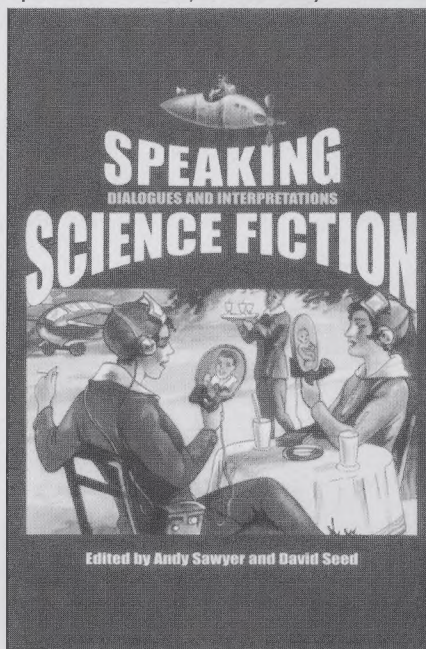
Price, Susan. **The Bearwood Witch.** “Point.” Scholastic, ISBN 0-439-99511-6, 196pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first edition; a “dark and disturbing novel by the award-winning author of *The Sterkarm Handshake*.”) *16th February 2001.*

Rayner, Jacqueline. **Earthworld.** “Doctor Who.” BBC, 0-563-53827-9, 253pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor; this may be a debut novel.) *5th March 2001.*

Reaves, Michael. **Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter.** “Star Wars.” Century/Lucas Books, April 2001

ISBN 0-7126-8417-4, 305pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2001.) *8th February 2001.*

Ryman, Geoff. **Lust, or No Harm Done.** Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-225987-7, 400pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the blurb reads provocatively: “What if you could have sex with anyone in the world?” – and that indeed is the fantastic premise of Ryman's new novel.) *21st February 2001.*



Sawyer, Andy, and David Seed, eds. **Speaking Science Fiction: Dialogues and Interpretations.** “Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies.” Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-844-8, 248pp, C-format paperback, £14.99. (Anthology of critical essays by various hands, consisting of papers selected from an academic sf conference held at Liverpool in 1996; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £32.99 [not seen]; contributors include Brian Aldiss, Brian Attebery, Andrew M. Butler, Candas Jane Dorsey, Veronica Hollinger, Gwyneth Jones, Roger Luckhurst, Farah Mendlesohn, José Manuel Mota, Josef Nesvadba and Simon Sellars; many of the essays are theoretical generalizations about the genre, but specific topics touched on include the sf writings of J. G. Ballard, Pat Cadigan, Robert A. Heinlein and Jack Womack.) *Late entry: 20th December 2000 publication, received in February 2001.*

Sladek, John. **Tik-Tok.** “Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions.” Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07235-0, 184pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1983; one of the late John Sladek's best robotic satires, it's dedicated: “To Tik-Tok of Oz, Talos of Crete, the Golem of Prague, Olympia of Nuremberg, Elektro of Westinghouse, Robby of Altair, Talbot Yancy of America and to all decent, law-abiding robots everywhere”; a delight.) *15th February 2001.*

Stephensen-Payne, Phil, and Ted Koppel. **Charles L. Harness: Attorney in Space—A Working Bibliography.** 2nd

edition. “Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 44.” Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-56-4, ix+28pp, small-press paperback, £2. (Sf author bibliography; the first edition appeared in 1992; this new, updated version is re-set in handy A5 format; recommended.) *Late entry: January publication, received in February 2001.*

Stewart, Paul. **Fright Train.** “Point Horror Unleashed.” Scholastic, ISBN 0-439-99871-9, 212pp, A-format paperback, cover by Tim Edmunds, £3.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first edition.) *16th March 2001.*

Stewart, Sean. **Galveston.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00800-3, 454pp, trade paperback, cover by Victor Stablin, \$14.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; although a fantasy of magic, it's set in the near future, in the eponymous Texan city.) *February 2001.*

Stine, Scott Aaron. **The Gorehound's Guide to Splatter Films of the 1960s and 1970s.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0924-X, vii+296pp, trade paperback, \$29.95. (Lightly illustrated A-Z critical guide to horror films featuring gore and violence; first edition; sterling-priced import copies should be available in Britain from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; another competent reference work which some may find useful and entertaining – though the sub-genre it covers is not exactly our favourite kind of movie.) *March 2001.*

Tepper, Sheri S. **Singer from the Sea.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-749-7, vi+512pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Rawlings, £6.99. (Sf novel; first published in the USA, 1999; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 148.) *8th March 2001.*

Thomsen, Brian M., and Martin H. Greenberg, eds. **Oceans of Magic.** DAW, ISBN 0-88677-979-0, 309pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, \$6.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains all-original seafaring fantasy stories by Rosemary Edghill, Jeff Grubb, Tanya Huff, Mel Odom, Mickey Zucker Reichert, Mike Resnick, Kristine Kathryn Rusch and others; it's one of a series produced under Greenberg's aegis for DAW Books, which includes such earlier titles as *Battle Magic* and *Mob Magic* [fantasy stories about gangsters!].) *March 2001.*

Wells, H. G. **The First Men in the Moon.** Introduction by Arthur C. Clarke. “SF Masterworks, 38.” Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-746-2, xii+196pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1901; one of the great early sf novels, and a perennially delightful read; this edition, with its undated Clarke intro and its unsigned afterword entitled “H. G. Wells and His Critics,” appears to be a straight reprint of the Everyman paperback edition of about a decade ago – although we're not told that.) *8th February 2001.*

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Keith Brooke & Eric Brown

foreword by Stephen Baxter

illustrations by Dominic Harman

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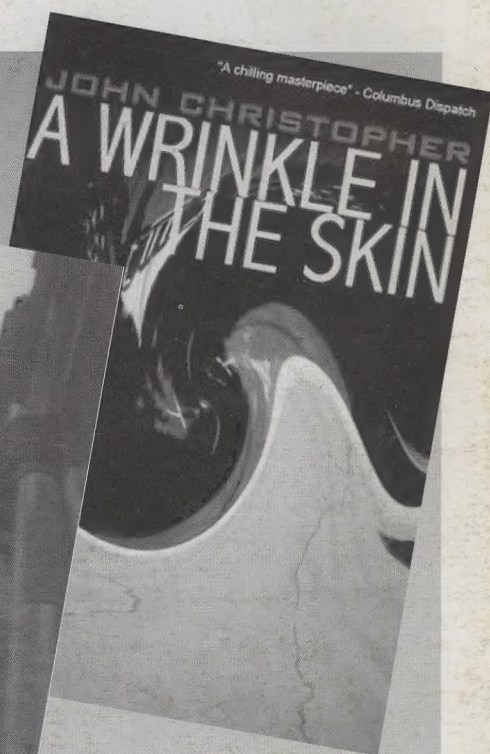
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